Investigation into the potential of artificial intelligence in the digital age

As a general-purpose technology, artificial intelligence (AI) has the potential to change our lives. It could bring many benefits, from increasing farming efficiency to helping to fight climate change and making transport safer, cleaner and more efficient. However, AI also generates a number of issues, such as opaque decision-making, discrimination, and intrusion into our private lives. To investigate these challenges and to analyse the impact of AI on the EU economy, the European Parliament decided to set up a special committee in June 2020. The Special Committee on Artificial Intelligence in a Digital Age (AIDA) adopted its final report on 22 March 2022, which Parliament is due to debate during the May plenary session.

Special Committee on Artificial Intelligence in a Digital Age

The European Parliament decided to set up its special AIDA committee on 18 June 2020. Its 12-month mandate (later extended to 18 months) was to analyse the future impact of AI on the EU economy and its contribution to business value and economic growth, investigate the challenges of deploying AI, and analyse non-EU countries’ AI approach. The committee would submit an evaluation defining common medium- and long-term EU objectives and the steps needed to reach them. The committee, chaired by Dragoş Tudorache (Renew Europe, Romania), has 34 full Members.

The committee has exchanged views with the European Commissioners responsible for internal market and digital affairs, as well as with the French Council Presidency, the German Bundestag Study Commission on AI, and with national parliaments. It has also held hearings with experts, policy-makers, and business representatives. The hearings have explored (for example) AI’s potential in fighting climate change and cancer, as well as its use in agriculture and financial services. The AIDA ‘working papers’ summarise the key takeaways from these hearings, including the positions of political groups. The AIDA committee has also held workshops and webinars with experts on topics such as ‘AI basics’, ‘AI and law enforcement’ and ‘AI and public administration’. In November 2021, the AIDA committee organised a mission to Washington DC, exchanging views with American partners on AI.

Draft report

The AIDA committee published a draft report (rapporteur: Axel Voss, EPP, Germany) on 2 November 2021, outlining AI’s enormous potential to improve almost every area of our lives, from helping to combat pandemics and global hunger, to improving healthcare. It could also significantly increase productivity, innovation, job creation and growth. According to the draft report, the EU should not regulate AI as a technology; but the type, intensity and timing of regulatory action should rather depend solely on the type of risk associated with a particular use of an AI system. The draft text warned that the EU is currently falling behind in the global tech race. If the EU wants to remain competitive, it needs to become an AI leader and set global standards. AI technologies also raise crucial ethical questions and fundamental rights concerns. Against this backdrop, the draft report addressed the opportunities and risks of AI in six specific areas: health, the EU Green Deal, external policy and security, competitiveness, democracy and the labour market.

During the 13 January 2022 debate on the 1,384 amendments tabled to the draft report, some Members stressed the risks of discrimination inherent in AI, and emphasised the importance of also using private funding for AI development. Members from different political groups disagreed on the question whether the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) should be touched in the process of future regulation of AI.
Final report

The AIDA committee voted on the amendments and adopted its final report on 22 March 2022. The report was adopted by the committee with 25 votes for, 2 against and 6 abstentions. The Parliament as a whole is due to debate and vote on the report during its plenary session on 2-5 May 2022.

The report is divided into five chapters:

- Introduction;
- Potential opportunities, risks and obstacles in the use of AI: six case studies examined by the AIDA committee;
- The EU's place in the global AI competition;
- 'Europe fit for the digital age' – Roadmap for becoming a global leader;
- Conclusion: an urgent call for action.

The report lays down a roadmap for AI, with specific recommendations for the European Commission, EU Member States and the European Parliament. For example, it calls on the Member States to review their national AI strategies and the Commission to create an AI skills framework for individuals. The report also calls for a European strategy for safe AI use as regards children, and to reduce the gender gap in this area. According to the AIDA committee, the EU has a unique chance to promote a human-centric, trustworthy and inclusive approach to AI, based on fundamental rights, that manages risks while taking full advantage of the benefits of AI.

At the international level, the EU has the potential to shape the international debate and contribute to the development of global rules and standards, as the first bloc in the world to introduce legislation on AI. The final report still regrets that the EU has not yet met all its aspirations regarding AI competition at the global level. It no longer says that the EU could become 'a digital colony of China, the US and other states', but instead underlines cooperation with like-minded international partners.

The report stresses the importance of availability and the free flow of high-quality data for the development of AI applications, in particular for researchers and start-ups, as a way to increase investment and boost innovation. According to the report, the current framework does not favour timely access and sufficient data-sharing. The initial criticism of the limitations posed by the GDPR was not included in the final report.

The report supports the use of regulatory sandboxes, which would allow AI products, services and approaches to be tested under real world conditions in a controlled environment before release onto the market.

Although the report puts greater emphasis on the potential benefits of AI technologies, it also stresses some systemic risks. For example, authoritarian regimes may use AI systems for mass surveillance purposes, ranking citizens, or restricting their movement. The report also warns against bias embedded in AI systems. Regarding the military use of AI, the report notes that Parliament has repeatedly called for an international ban on the development, production and use of lethal autonomous weapons systems.

Finally, the report states that functional AI needs strong deployment of broadband, fibre, edge nodes and 5G, as well as prioritisation of key emerging technologies such as quantum computing.

The AIDA report will complement other legislative and non-legislative initiatives in this area, such as the Commission’s proposal for an EU regulatory framework on AI. As co-legislators, the European Parliament and the Council are currently discussing this proposal.

This updates an earlier 'At a glance' note, from March 2022.