BIG TECH AND STATE SOVEREIGNTY

Lucia Sinapi-Thomas, Executive Director of Capgemini Ventures

There is an operational need but Clément, in your paper, you also point out that lag effect but also that this is paving the way for big tech intrusion into what would normally be the sovereign space for states. Could you elaborate on that?

Clément Tonon, Member of the French Council of State

My point about sovereignty was that from a public sector point of view when you deal with a private company to carry out policy, you will undoubtedly improve the efficiency of your policy. However, you will also lose the control that you had over this policy. It is not really a debate about sovereignty it is a debate about the level of control you want to retain on a given policy. For example, during the crisis there was a debate around the *TousAntiCovid* mobile phone tracking app. The French government decided to develop a sovereign centralized application by itself, whereas other governments in Europe, including eventually the UK and Germany, decided to go with the decentralized Apple and Google solution. You can correct me if I am wrong, but there was a fierce debate in Germany about the state having access to a massive amount of personal data. In France, the debate was quite different, and you have to watch the speech by the Minister for Digital Affairs, Cedric O, to the National Assembly. He had to explain to MPs why the French government wanted to develop a sovereign application and he told them that it was no surprise because France was the only country in continental Europe that had nuclear weapons. I think the link between nuclear weapons and digital sovereignty can seem farfetched, but it actually says a lot about the French concept of digital sovereignty, that is very different I think from the German one.

Faruk Tuncer, Co-Founder and Chief Executive Officer of Polyteia

That is very interesting because I think in Germany the perspective comes from the past and data protection, to lose data to a foreign state rather from this perspective of nuclear weapons because the history and military are different. From our perspective, I have heard that Palantir was used in France for the database and that is unimaginable in Germany, an American company building the Covid database for a country because people give their data.

Clément Tonon

That was my second example, in France we have the internal security service contracting with Palantir to build up a database on security issues. Therefore, the question is are we sovereign on our security policy?

My second point about sovereignty is about values because I think values matter when it comes to technology. Technology is never value neutral and I will take the example of smart cities because China has been developing smart cities since the SARS epidemic in 2003. More and more defense and security companies in China are investing in smart city solutions and China is selling more and more of them to countries in Central Asia, Africa and the Middle East and it has become a soft power tool. In the official language in China, a smart city is called a safe city, so it is very different from our conception. When it comes to GovTech I think values matter and we will have to dig into that in the years to come.

My final point on the sovereignty topic is for states to handle the rise of GovTech they will have to be very clear about which policies they want to outsource or not. Second, they have to attract new talents because they will have to work on the same level of knowledge and skills as private companies and I can promise you, that is a real revolution for public HR to attract new talent in the GovTech sector. Finally, I really believe that it is a subject for public debate. Citizens have to be able to express themselves on the subject of GovTech because in the end it is the quality of public services that it is at stake and eventually, their personal data.

Lucia Sinapi-Thomas

Absolutely.