



By: *Elise Quevedo*

The EU at 40: Balancing progress and responsibility



This year, the European Union **marks** its 40th anniversary. That's four decades of collaboration, evolution, and shared ambition. This milestone is an opportunity to take a step back and reflect on what Europe has truly achieved. And where do we go from here?

With 32 million enterprises operating across the Schengen area, the EU has quietly become one of the most influential ecosystems in the world. It may not always grab headlines like Silicon Valley, but its impact continues to grow.

We often talk about innovation as a sprint, but in Europe, it's been more of a marathon. Slow, steady, and often deeply principled. Sometimes it reminds me of Aesop's fable, "The Tortoise and the Hare." Faster doesn't always mean you will win the race!

That approach has yielded real benefits, especially when it comes to striking a balance between progress and responsibility, even when there's room for growth.

I will take a look at how the EU has supported technology over the past 40 years, where it's fallen short, and how it can lead the way in the years to come.

The Power of Collective Innovation

One of the EU's greatest strengths is its ability to bring countries together under a shared vision. For technology, that means cross-border trade, harmonising standards, funding collaborative research, and creating an environment where startups and corporations can thrive across multiple countries.

5 Ways the EU Has Elevated Tech Innovation

GDPR

When the **GDPR** came into force in 2018, it regulated privacy in the European Union. It set the bar for the rest of the world. By prioritising user rights and ethical data use, the EU

created a model that others continue to follow. It pushed companies, large and small, to take data responsibility seriously.

Horizon Europe

Horizon Europe is the EU's flagship research and innovation programme, backed by €93.5 billion. It's funding everything from AI and quantum computing to climate tech and medical breakthroughs. It connects people and ideas across borders.

Europe's Own Satellite System Galileo

While the US has GPS and Russia has **GLONASS**, Europe created **Galileo**. This satellite navigation system aims to provide higher precision and reliability, ensuring strategic independence. It now supports industries such as aviation, logistics, and autonomous vehicles.

EIT: Nurturing Innovation Communities

The **European Institute of Innovation and Technology** connects education, research, and business. Through its Knowledge and Innovation Communities, it has helped scale startups, support entrepreneurs, and build ecosystems in sectors such as health, climate, and digital.

No More Roaming Fees

It may seem small, but ending **roaming** charges across EU countries removed a significant barrier to mobility and productivity.



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Entrepreneurs, freelancers, and digital nomads can now work and connect freely, helping build a more agile and interconnected business environment.

This one hits close to home, so I had to mention it. As I travel around Europe frequently, the aftermath of Brexit for mobile services was a frustrating process, as we temporarily lost access to free roaming in the EU from the UK whilst carriers figured out new rules and roaming access.

Where the EU Missed the Mark

Even with these achievements, not everything has gone smoothly. There are still moments when the EU's structure slows down innovation.

Despite being a single market, Europe's digital landscape often still feels fragmented. Regulatory inconsistencies, language barriers, and cultural differences make it hard for startups to scale quickly across borders.

EU funding is generous, but the application processes are often slow and complex

Many founders find it easier to launch in the US, where they can access a larger, unified market. Think about any story over the past few years you've heard of founders leaving Europe to set up in the US. It's still an issue today.

Who else agrees that bureaucracy can slow progress? EU funding is generous, but the application processes are often slow and complex. For early-stage startups that need to move fast, the red tape can be a dealbreaker.

While large corporations may have the resources to navigate these systems, smaller teams often miss out on valuable opportunities.

A New Tool for the AI Era

Recently, the EU **funded** A14Europe and DeployAI to develop a new AI toolbox. It's an online platform designed to help businesses adopt artificial intelligence responsibly and transparently.

The EU has taken a clear position that innovation must align with human rights and public trust. This AI toolbox provides companies with the tools they need to build smarter, yet also more responsibly.

The Real Value of Being in the EU

Beyond funding or regulations, the greatest benefit of EU membership is connection. Researchers in the Netherlands can work with startups in Croatia. Policymakers in France can learn from real-world deployments in Portugal. This constant flow of knowledge, talent, and resources is what makes the EU special.

Tech will never thrive in isolation, just like humans were never meant to thrive alone. It needs ecosystems. The EU is already one of the most powerful ecosystems on the planet, but it needs to tell its story better and move faster when it counts.

What Needs to Evolve?

Over the years, it has become clear that Europe has the talent, the tools, and the funding. The next step is making all of that more accessible.

For example, startups shouldn't need to hire full-time grant writers to access innovation funding. Delays and red tape can kill momentum. And finally, we need to spotlight European success stories more boldly. The world should know what Europe is building.

Looking Ahead

After 40 years, the EU has proven its commitment to collaboration, progress, and shared opportunity. But the next 40 will demand even more courage.

We're entering an era of exponential change, driven by technologies that challenge our norms and stretch our imaginations.

Europe doesn't need to be the fastest here. It needs to be the most steady and intentional tortoise (maybe not as slow, but you understand my metaphor). If the EU gets that right, it can build tech that leaves a legacy worth celebrating.

EU, are you ready for another 40 years?