

What is the European sovereign cloud?

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Billions of euros are flooding into the cloud industry in Europe, with US tech giants constructing vast data centers all around the continent.

Part of the rallying cry behind this rapid influx of cash and innovation has been to create a so-called sovereign cloud for Europe.

What is a sovereign cloud?

The cloud is a catch-all term for the method of storing data in vast warehouses run by external companies rather than on local computers managed in-house.

A "sovereign cloud" is the idea that a country, region or community will have control over that data—where it is stored, how it is accessed, who oversees it.

Francisco Mingorance, secretary general of European cloud industry body CISPE, told AFP that proponents of sovereign cloud aim to give their customers a choice about data privacy.

He said that would entail offering "immunity from foreign jurisdictions accessing European citizens' or companies' data by virtue of their national legislation—be that in the US, China or another jurisdiction".

Why is it needed?

US tech giants Amazon (AWS), Google and Microsoft dominate the cloud industry.

US law mandates that they must pass on data—even sensitive personal information—if requested by US security agencies.

These [data transfers](#) have repeatedly been ruled illegal under EU law so one of the key purposes of building a sovereign cloud has been to keep personal data of Europeans within Europe.

Who is pushing for it?

"France is very much in favour of it and supporting it," Ulrich Ahle, CEO of European cloud project Gaia-X, told AFP.

"Other countries are not that much in favour and are not that much requesting it."

The French debate often moves beyond data concerns to push a wider vision of sovereignty that involves creating European—or specifically French—digital champions who can compete with US tech giants.

Who is building it?

Amazon is pushing harder than anyone to be seen as the architect of the European sovereign cloud.

The firm announced in October last year it would begin building out "the AWS European Sovereign Cloud, a new, independent cloud for Europe" that would be entirely separate from its other regions.

A 7.8-billion-euro investment in Germany last month was emblazoned with the "sovereign" branding.

Although Microsoft and Google also habitually announce multi-billion euro investments in European data centers, they do not use the sovereignty branding.

Would it solve data privacy issues?

"AWS and co are still trying to argue that the location of the servers is relevant. It is not," [data privacy](#) campaigner Max Schrems told AFP.

US companies would still be controllers of the data, and so would still be

obliged to hand it over if requested by a US order.

The big US firms are experimenting with other ways of getting around the issue, particularly by creating European entities and partnerships that would legally be in charge of the data.

But Schrems said these ideas were not yet realized.

"They oftentimes say this is their plan for the future, but so far there is no 'solid' system that I am aware of where this is done properly," he said.

What are European governments doing?

The French and German governments joined forces in 2019 to announce the Gaia-X initiative—a collaboration between companies, officials and academics to build a European data and technology infrastructure.

Although one of its stated aims was to foster European alternatives to big tech, Amazon and Microsoft are among its members.

France has since framed its own national standard called "trusted cloud", which aims to reduce the role of non-European firms in controlling data.

The EU is also developing a standard but a huge row has engulfed the process after EU officials drafted a version that dropped a long-standing commitment to European sovereignty.

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