

France quietly catches rivals in battle for data center supremacy

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Paris Digital Park, owned by US firm Digital Realty, is one of more than 70 centers that ring the French capital.

At the end of a narrow suburban street north of Paris, a giant structure shrouded in a skin of mesh and steel looks like a football stadium, but is in fact a vast data center.

Paris Digital Park, which towers over four-story apartment blocks and is owned by US firm Digital Realty, is one of more than 70 centers that ring the French capital—more than a third of the country's total.

The government is pushing hard to expand an industry seen as the backbone of the digital economy, playing catch-up with established hubs like London and Frankfurt, and is so far avoiding the backlash that has slowed development elsewhere.

"The Paris region is the fourth largest hub in the world for content exchanges," Fabrice Coquio, President of Digital Realty France, told AFP on a recent tour of his firm's campus.

The capital region's data center industry is already worth 1.2 billion euros (\$1.3 billion), according to specialist consultancy Structure Research.

And Coquio, like everyone else in the industry, believes artificial intelligence is about to supercharge it.

He said the massive computing needs of AI would power a "second wave" of expansion for data centers, after the shift to cloud computing fueled the first wave.

Jerome Total of French firm Data4 said there were virtually no AI-ready data centers in France right now. But by 2030 data capacity would double in France, with between 30 and 40 percent of it dedicated to the technology, according to a recent report by trade group Datacenter.

That expansion will suck up power and land on a dramatic scale—Coquio sees electricity usage at data centers doubling in the next four years.

But unlike in other parts of the world, there are few dissenting voices in France.

'Isolated' protests

Concerns over energy and [land use](#) pushed Amsterdam and Dublin to restrict licenses for new data centers—helping Paris overtake the Dutch capital in the race for market share.

Frankfurt has clamped down on data center sprawl with new zoning and energy rules.

And public protests have been seen recently from the Netherlands to the heart of the global industry in the US state of Virginia.

Yet in France, one of the few concerted efforts to block a center was back in 2015 when Coquio's firm—then known as Interxion—had to overcome local protests and legal challenges to an earlier building.

Amazon's data center arm, AWS, also backed off from a planned center in 2021 after facing pushback in Bretigny-sur-Orge, in the south of Paris.

"Protests have existed and still exist, but they are very ad hoc and isolated," said Clement Marquet, a researcher at Paris-based engineering school Mines.

He said the objections had not gone beyond NIMBY, or "not in my backyard".

Those who had tried to widen the issue to the broader climate costs of digital developments "failed to bring people together over time and eventually gave up", said Marquet.

Faster planning

France already has some advantages that explain why data center developments are not as divisive as in other countries.

It is much bigger than the Netherlands or Ireland, with much more free land and a less strained power grid.

Added to this, national laws largely restrict data center companies to building on land already in industrial use.

Coquio stresses that his new Paris campus is built on a former Airbus helicopter plant.

Keeping developments mostly out of the public eye, tucked away next to motorways, in former factories, and on wasteland, has helped keep the public neutral about the centers.

However, this balance could be about to shift.

Before President Emmanuel Macron called snap elections in June that his centrist party lost, resulting in a hung parliament, his government had been trying to push through a law that would allow large [data centers](#) to be classified as projects of major national interest.

The idea would be to speed up planning processes and connection to the power grid.

Marquet said France should be moving in the opposite direction and putting more thought into planning.

"In the long term, we all need to think hard about the ecological consequences of digital growth in general," he said, labeling the current

habit of ignoring climate concerns as "absurd".

But with the ramped-up computing needs of AI combining with looser regulation, the transformation of France's post-industrial suburbs looks set to continue apace.

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