

STAYING IN CONTROL IN THE AI ERA

AI on Your Terms

Why governance, platforms and digital sovereignty decide who stays in control.

Keynote by Jan Smedts

Head of Digital Vlaanderen

The Plectrum, Ghent · 2 July 2026

Jan Smedts opened with a plectrum, the small pick that turns loose guitar strings into music.

His point: AI, data and platforms are all “technologies under tension.” Without direction, they produce noise. The question every organisation now faces is *who sets the rhythm*.

67%

of people already use AI at work

18%

of organisations have an AI governance framework (McKinsey)

>50%

of corporations reported a negative AI incident in the past year

Adoption is everywhere. Control is nowhere.

The real assignment: faster **and** safer

Organisations tend to frame speed and security as a trade-off. Smedts argued it is one single assignment: move faster, become safer, use data and AI more intelligently, and get a grip on dependencies, all at the same time.

The old playbook was built for efficiency, globalisation, just-in-time supply chains, “connect everything” IT. That world worked until it stopped: a blocked canal, a blocked strait, or one paused model licence is enough to expose it.

AI does not fix fragile foundations. It is a dependency multiplier.

Strategic autonomy = optionality, not isolation

Autonomy does not mean building digital walls or doing everything yourself. It means never being forced or locked in. Three things every organisation needs:

Plan A: use the best available technology for the mission: create, innovate, experiment.

Plan B: a credible, working alternative you could actually switch to.

A migration path: between A and B, agreed and tested *before* you need it.

When a U.S. export-control suspension briefly cut access to a major model provider, then lifted it a day and a half later, it exposed a dependency now rather than in five years. **Optionality is the strategic asset of tomorrow.**

Staying in control in the AI era — the panel, The Plectrum, Ghent



CYBERSECURITY

The biggest risk is the one you built yourself

External attacks have tripled in two years, often from state-sponsored actors, but Smedts was blunt: the bigger risk is internal. Every one-off exception, custom integration and separate security approach is a new weak spot. Years of “new need → new connection” have left most architectures looking like spaghetti nobody fully understands.

THE FIX

Platformisation, a shared “Government OS”

Flanders embeds complexity once, into a shared foundation, instead of rebuilding it per project: network, workstations, hosting, data/workflow, and the citizen-interaction layer. Applications are built *on top*, reusing security, data and integration by default. Standardisation removes complexity from every new project and frees teams to differentiate where it adds value.

Europe's sovereignty gap, and a third way

Concentrated dependency turns autonomy from a nice-to-have into a strategic necessity.

70%

of the EU cloud market sits with US hyperscalers

13%

held by European cloud providers

3×

increase in external cyberattacks over two years

The **US** scales through private-market platforms; **China** because the state *is* the platform. **Europe** needs a third way, scale through collaboration.

CLOSING CALL

Build a coalition of the willing

Rather than waiting for 27 member states to agree, “we lose five years in the process,” Smedts called for locomotives: public and private organisations willing to move first, so others can jump on the train once it's moving. Flanders' underrated advantage, he argued, is exactly this capacity to collaborate, citing ASML's ecosystem model as proof it can be a genuine competitive edge.

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The question is no longer whether or how fast we digitise — it's whether we can digitise without losing control.

Jan Smedts, Head of Digital Vlaanderen

Five takeaways for your organisation

- 01 Map your dependencies** before a vendor, model or regulator maps them for you.
- 02 Design a Plan B and a migration path** for every critical AI/cloud dependency.
- 03 Fix the foundation, not the front end:** data quality and architecture decide if AI helps or hurts.
- 04 Standardise the boring parts** so your teams can innovate where you actually differentiate.
- 05 Find your coalition:** sovereignty and platform scale are easier built together than alone.