

Breton no longer needs to find unusual ways to convince technology leaders: he just picks up the phone and calls them. During the Covid-19 lockdown, he asked Netflix CEO Reed Hastings to lower the definition of videos on his platform to prevent European networks from being overwhelmed – “I just asked him to help me out”. Then there was the time when he told Facebook’s CEO to tackle disinformation on the platform: “Mark, everything that is not forbidden by law in the informational space is not necessarily authorized, think about it.” In a public video-conference in May, Breton laid into Zuckerberg, urging him to “pay taxes”.

Breton believes tech CEOs will do as he asks. “I know this world. I come from it. I know the actors,” he says. “I am asking

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them to do things that are feasible. I tell them that if they want to keep doing business in the EU, it’s up to them to adapt, not me.”

Observers agree that one of Breton’s greatest strengths as a commissioner is his network of contacts in business, coupled with a notable technology and business acumen. “He’s an insider, unlike previous commissioners in his position,” said Julien Nocetti, digital policy expert and teaching fellow at France’s St-Cyr military academy. “It is fairly positive for the EU Commission to have someone like him – it’s a strong political signal.”

Breton has developed his approach to policy-making by building on his experience in both the private sector and government. He thinks management and public action need to anticipate rather than follow regulation, thus encouraging actors to modify their behaviour. In his teaching days at Harvard, he called this method “soft law”.

“If you tell [companies] ‘change your behaviour a little’ and they say yes, they’ll do it in 24 hours” he explains. “I’m gaining time and we can obtain results through constructive dialogue.”

On the other hand, Breton says he and the commission are ready to regulate and use “extremely strict” measures – from fines all the way to company break-ups, if tech CEOs do not adapt to European requests and standards. “We are clear about what we need and they’d better anticipate before law is put into place.”

Faced with the unbridled growing power and influence of Google, Apple, Facebook and Amazon, the commission, which initiates the laws for the European Union, has been trying to establish rules to keep their actions under check. Breton is particularly concerned about the spread of disinformation and hate speech. He likes to call the internet the “informational space”, one of the four spaces making up our geopolitical reality – together with land, sea and air. The first three have been regulated over the centuries via laws, taxes and registers; now Breton wants to bring order to the fourth.

That is no mean feat in these volatile times of pandemic and geopolitical stand-offs. The US and China are stuck in a confrontation that often revolves on technological matters – from 5G to social media – forcing the European Union to think seriously about achieving its own technological autonomy. “We see a continuity in a pre-existing EU digital policy, but with new rhetorical elements – like a clearer affirmation of Europe’s place in the world and of its liberty to determine its own digital path,” says Nocetti. The novel coronavirus crisis has compounded that urge, highlighting the EU’s need to be less reliant on foreign supply chains and companies.

But to accomplish that, Europe and its tech sector will need to scale up. Up until now, the EU Commission’s chief forays into technology have amounted to regulation and high-profile fines. That is changing: according to Isabel Skierka, a data and technology fellow at the Global Public Policy Institute, the commission is focusing on encouraging innovation in order to “build a European digital ecosystem”, able to hold its own compared to the US. Since he joined the commission in December 2019, Breton has already unveiled plans to attain

that, including the EU’s digital and industrial strategies and an AI and data roadmap.

“The EU has long had the image of regulator, and maybe of over-regulator,” Breton says. “We will make sure that European entrepreneurs can blossom.”

His hardest battle might be within the Commission itself, says Johan Bjerckem, an analyst at the European Policy Centre in Brussels. Breton’s digital portfolio overlaps with EU executive vice-president and antitrust supremo Margrethe Vestager, who has both more powers than Breton and a different style – she is the one who has repeatedly slapped American tech titans with eye-watering fines.

“Vestager is much more focused on the need to have fair competition across Europe,” Bjerckem says. “For Breton, it’s much more important to boost the European tech industry.” Clothilde Goujard

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