

# Curtail public dependencies of private tech

## Background

European states are increasingly automating their welfare services. The automation of welfare varies across European countries as does the way welfare provision is organised. The systems for automation range from static decision trees to natural language processing applications including large language models (LLMs) and predictive risk scoring. The implementation of these systems has far-reaching consequences both for the daily work of caseworkers in public institutions as well as for the equal and just treatment, and social rights of the people. Considering the perspective of the people who are affected by automation, the AUTO-WELF project has identified several challenges and gives procedural recommendations to address them.

**Our recommendations are intended to foster democratic control over digital public infrastructures, ensure that these infrastructures are resilient, and align innovation with long-term public interest in welfare and human flourishing.**

### What are the challenges?

Key findings from the AUTO-WELF project show that the technological infrastructure underpinning automated welfare provision is often provided by private actors – especially in Nordic countries, less so in Austria and Germany with their strong focus on data protection. While public-private partnerships between state institutions and the tech industry have been crucial for accelerating the digital transformation in the public sector, they also create tensions around infrastructural dependency for the welfare state. Major challenges include:

- ◆ **Loss of control:** The state loses control over infrastructure during enhanced privatization and commercialization of areas that traditionally have been outside of market logics.
- ◆ **Public dependency** on big tech increases and with it the impact of large cooperations on the people and their rights.
- ◆ **Infrastructural lock-ins:** An overreliance on specific solutions offered by big tech monopolies, for example Microsoft and Amazon Cloud Service, leads to lock-ins of critical digital infrastructure across European welfare states, with little access to alternatives for public institutions. This makes it difficult for the public sector to refrain from using solutions from tech companies that do not align with European democratic rights.

### What is to be done?

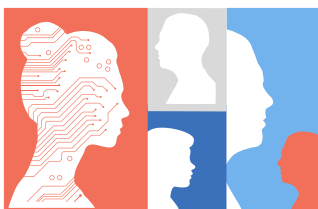
Within the public sector, there is a notable lack of dedicated and interdisciplinary oversight with automated welfare systems. Existing auditing institutions, such as national courts of audit, data protection agencies, equality bodies and ombuds institutions, often lack the adequate resources or interdisciplinary expertise required to assess the broader impacts of automated systems – particularly regarding issues of equality and discrimination exacerbated by automated systems.

To safeguard public interest in public sector use of automated systems, it is essential to adopt a comprehensive policy approach that balances sociotechnical innovation with democratic governance. These recommendations aim to build a resilient, transparent, and inclusive digital public sector rooted in autonomy and public accountability.

1. **Strategic Public Investment in European Technology.** Establish and sustain long-term EU and national investment strategies to support public digital infrastructure and solutions. On the EU level more funding for research and development to nourish public value-driven alternatives to the current digital infrastructure providers. It is also important to support the development and maintenance of open technologies through public grants and procurement terms, as well as to systematic monitor digital infrastructure developments.
2. **Reform Public Procurement Practices on the national level supported by European regulation** by developing transparent procurement procedures with clearly defined public value criteria such as sustainability, accountability, explainability, equality and interoperability. Include deliberative citizen councils to review and assess major technological procurements as part of the design and implementation process.
3. **Establish Collaborative Oversight Mechanisms.** Foster cross-sectoral coalitions that bring together researchers, public administrators, unions, professional associations and civil society organizations to co-design accountability frameworks such as fundamental rights impact assessment. Conduct public consultations before new systems are decided upon and introduced, ensuring broad societal input. This will also stimulate informed public debate on the digital transformation taking place across European countries.
4. **Support Interdisciplinary Knowledge Ecosystems** by providing targeted research funding to advocacy organizations and expert groups working on algorithmic systems in the public sector. The goal is to connect researchers, civil society, and policymakers through knowledge-broker platforms, and to create stronger academic incentives that reward public engagement and inter- and trans-disciplinary policy-oriented research.
5. **Account for local and contextual specificities:** To successfully implement the above-mentioned instruments and measures, national institutions, stakeholders, and local expertise need to be consulted. This is important to account for the diversity of European welfare states and their states of automation, as well as institutional specificities that may vary across contexts. It further helps to embed new sociotechnical practices in existent institutional contexts and organizational routines.

## Basic data on AUTO-WELF

- ◆ Three-year, comparative project on the algorithmic automation of core welfare services and communal welfare infrastructures in 8 European countries (Austria, Denmark, Estonia, Germany, Italy, Poland, Portugal and Sweden)
- ◆ Ethnographic research on the implementation of automated systems
- ◆ Workshops with affected people and caseworkers including future visions, data dreaming and mind scripting for algorithmic automation that supports human flourishing



The AUTO-WELF project is supported by Austrian Science Fund: [I 6075-G], Austria; Independent Research Fund, Denmark; BMBF, Germany; National Science Centre, Poland (grant no.2021/03/Y/HS5/00263); FORTE, Sweden, under CHANSE ERA-NET Co-fund programme, which has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme, under Grant Agreement no 101004509.

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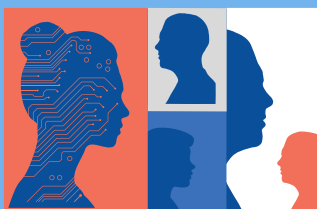
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