



AI's transformative effect on SMEs: what to expect, how to prepare

22 January 2026



— Sophia Zakari



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For SMEs developing AI, access to main components such as data, computing power and skills remains difficult. That creates market concentration and limits innovation. For instance, the Data Act significantly improved access to data. However, ongoing discussions under the Digital Omnibus risk watering down these objectives.

At the same time, SMEs using AI need legal certainty, particularly on data use and the interaction with existing frameworks such as the GDPR. “Reporting and compliance obligations must remain strictly proportionate to enable entrepreneurs to use AI effectively to grow their businesses”, explained Ms Willems.

For many SMEs that are still finding their way around AI, capacity building, AI literacy and user-friendly tools are essential. SMEUnited stressed the importance of working closely with SME organisations on the ground to provide tailored support.

It is important to take into account the growing relevance of AI at work, as these tools become more widespread. In this context, Ms Willems underlines that “It is essential that the Think Small First principle is applied from the outset to avoid disproportionate burdens”. In this context, SMEUnited insists EU institutions should focus and prioritise on practical guidance to help SMEs apply existing rules correctly.

Ms Willems concluded by stressing that Europe must take decisive action now if it wants SMEs to fully benefit from AI. “This requires efforts to improve access to

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A more connected, safer digital Single Market

Brussels, 22/01/2026 – “This week, the Commission moved towards more security and a less fragmented Single Market with the publication of the Cybersecurity Act and the Digital Networks Act”, noted SMEUnited President Galli. Europe’s digital transition will only succeed if SMEs can fully benefit from secure, affordable and high-



14 January 2026

Public Procurement Directives must focus on how to procure, not what to procure

“The revision of the Public Procurement Directives must focus on how procurement is carried out, not on what is procured. Simplification, transparency, and access for SMEs have to be at the core”, said Gerhard Huemer, Director for Economic & Fiscal

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Wallet successful for SMEs

Complex cross-border procedures deepen the fragmentation of the Single Market. Although many administrative procedures in Member States are already digital, the lack of interoperability of data reduces the added value of digitalisation. SMEs still face fragmentation in terms of national portals, formats and verification requirements, which makes cross-border activity complex, time-consuming and costly. This fragmentation remains a major obstacle for SMEs if they want to operate across borders and benefit fully from the Single Market.

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