PARIS — Google has a problem in China. Is it headed for a bigger one in Europe?

So far, no one has accused European governments of cyberattacks like those that Google says it has suffered in China. But on issues ranging from privacy to copyright protection to the dominance of Google's Internet search engine, clashes with European lawmakers, regulators and consumer advocates are escalating.

The stakes are high — potentially higher for Google and its shareholders than anything that happens in China. For nowhere else in the world is Google as powerful and as potentially vulnerable as in Europe. Across most of the Continent, Google is by far the biggest search engine, with a substantially bigger market share than in the United States. In a single European country, Britain, Google has roughly 10 times its estimated sales in China.

To some politicians in Europe, where the media sector is mostly fragmented along national lines and sometimes dependent on public subsidies, Google’s border-straddling scale and its brash, profit-fueled ambitions are enough to raise alarms.

In Germany, Justice Minister Sabine Leutheusser-Schnarrenberger complained recently about Google’s instinct for “pressing ahead,” and its “megalomania,” saying the company was tearing down privacy protections and trampling on author’s rights.

“On the whole, I see a giant monopoly developing, largely unnoticed, similar to Microsoft,” she said in an interview with the magazine Der Spiegel. A spokesman later clarified that she had not meant to express an opinion on antitrust matters, which are outside her jurisdiction.

Google insists that ordinary Europeans do not have similar fears; gripes, it says, come mostly from competitors like Microsoft and from media companies whose longtime business models are threatened by technological change.

““We love being in Europe and we have many users across many countries who enjoy our products,” the company said in a statement. “Our popularity means some people will complain. The important thing for us is to do the right thing, and that means not locking our users into our products and working well with our partners.”

Google’s most immediate challenges may be in Italy.

This month a decision is expected in a trial in Milan, where four Google executives have
been charged with defamation and privacy violations in a case involving videos posted on a Google Web site, showing the bullying of an autistic boy.

The company says a guilty verdict might require it to edit content on its YouTube video-sharing service before it is posted; that, it says, would be incompatible with the open spirit of the Internet, as well as European Union guidelines.

Prosecutors accuse Google of negligence, saying it was too slow to remove the video. But Google sees a political dimension.

One of the four executives, Peter Fleischer, Google’s chief privacy counsel, called the case part of “an attack on a decade of progress” for Internet companies in Italy.

As both sides await a verdict, the government of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi has proposed a law making online video services like YouTube liable for invasions of privacy, violations of copyright and other transgressions that occur in user generated content. Meanwhile Google is contesting a copyright lawsuit from Mediaset, Mr. Berlusconi’s family company, which is the largest commercial television broadcaster in Italy. 

“It’s a full-scale battle against Google in Italy,” said Paolo Brini, a Perugia-based spokesman for Scambio Etico, a group that campaigns for civil liberties in cyberspace.

On another front, Italian competition authorities last summer raided the company’s Milan offices, opening an investigation of Google News, which displays excerpts from online news stories. Italian publishers contend that Google News violates their copyrights, but say they cannot remove their articles from the service without slipping in Google’s search rankings, costing them ad revenue. Google says there is no such link between Google News and the search engine.

Germany is not far behind Italy in causing headaches for Google.

German newspaper and magazine publishers have also complained to competition authorities, noting that all of their Web sites together earn only about €100 million a year from advertising, while Google generates an estimated €1.2 billion from search advertising in Germany.

The federal anti-cartel agency is gathering information, but has not yet decided whether to open a formal investigation.

Google says that far from harming publishers, it is their best friend — in Germany as in other countries. The company says it distributed $5.3 billion last year to Web publishers globally who participated in its advertising partnership program.

German publishers have persuaded the government of Chancellor Angela Merkel to support a new kind of copyright protecting journalistic content on the Web. Analysts say the measure, which has not yet been introduced, could require Web companies like Google to buy special licenses to cite content published elsewhere.

The German government also objected to Google’s U.S. legal settlement with authors and publishers, which aims to make millions of out-of-print works that are still under copyright available for sale in digital form.

Attitudes toward Google in Germany have been colored by a heated debate over privacy. Several German towns and cities have moved to block Google from taking pictures of storefronts and homes for its Street View service, which shows street-level pictures from addresses around the world — though not yet in Germany.

“Google made a lot of mistakes on privacy in Europe,” said Till Kreutzer, a Hamburg-based media lawyer. “You cannot deal with this issue in the same way all over the world.”

While Street View has been popular in some European countries, the data protection...
authorities in Switzerland recently sued Google to try to get it to step up privacy protections.

Privacy concerns have also resonated with the European Commission in Brussels, which has pushed Google and other U.S. Internet companies to shorten the period for which they retain consumer data.

But Google has largely avoided run-ins with the commission's powerful competition arm, which has struck fear in American boardrooms because of its dogged pursuit of antitrust cases against Microsoft, Intel and other U.S. multinationals.

Two years ago, the commission cleared Google's purchase of the online advertising specialist DoubleClick, dismissing objections from rivals that it would concentrate too much power in one company.

With a new commission set to take office, rivals of Google, including Microsoft, are stepping up their lobbying efforts, highlighting the strength of Google's position in Europe.

“Whenever you have a company that has more than a 90 percent market share in a key market, it is inevitable that people will have questions to ask,” Brad Smith, Microsoft general counsel, told reporters in Brussels last week. “We say that with some experience.”

According to ComScore, a research firm, Google handles 80 percent of European Web searches — compared with 65 percent in the United States.

And while Yahoo and Microsoft’s Bing offer modest competition in the United States, with 17 percent and 11 percent, respectively, they are virtually nonexistent in Europe, with less then 2 percent each, according to ComScore.

Google’s share of European ad revenue linked to Internet searches is probably above 90 percent, analysts say.

Commission officials have said that a dominant market share is insufficient cause for an antitrust case; there must be evidence that a company is abusing this position to stifle competition. Analysts say the dearth of homegrown rivals to Google could also undermine any move to take regulatory action against the company.

“Brussels may not want to pick a fight with Google, because there is no one to reward if they win,” said Evan Stewart, an antitrust expert at the law firm of Zuckerman Spaeder in Washington.

For lawmakers, Europe’s weakness on the Internet, and Google’s strength, presents another problem. To move their economies into the digital age, European countries may need Google, its money and its savoir faire.

This conundrum is evident in France, where Google features prominently in government proposals to bring the country's cultural heritage into the 21st century.

Last month, a special commission recommended inviting Google to participate in a massive project to scan the archives of French public libraries, assuming it agreed to certain conditions. That would cause French publishers to swallow hard; only in December, they won a court ruling blocking Google from digitizing copyrighted books.

Another government-sponsored panel last month recommended tapping Google in another way, by imposing a special tax on Internet advertising, in order to help the troubled French music industry. The experts also recommended that the antitrust authorities examine Google's position in the online advertising market.

“In Europe, we don’t have an Internet media industry,” said Robin Meyer-Lucht, a Berlin-based digital media consultant. “If we did, I’m sure the attitude would be
different.

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