Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the Proposal for a Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council on interoperability solutions for European public administrations (ISA)

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(2009/C 218/07)

On 14 October 2008 the Council decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 156 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on the


The Section for Transport, Energy, Infrastructure and the Information Society, which was responsible for preparing the Committee’s work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 29 January 2009. The rapporteur was Mr PEZZINI.

At its 451st plenary session, held on 25 and 26 February 2009 (meeting of 25 February 2009), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 130 votes, nem. con. with one abstention.

1. Conclusions and recommendations

1.1 The EESC supports the Commission’s initiative to launch the ISA programme, convinced that it will continue to secure and increase genuine effective interoperability in the European single market’s complex new systems.

1.2 The EESC believes that it is essential for the practical implementation of the freedoms laid down in the Treaty for interoperability mechanisms to be fully implemented, benefiting not just administrations and institutions but also the public, businesses and organised civil society in general.

1.3 There is a clear need for a specific strategy on security of personal and financial data, as the EESC has repeatedly stressed in its opinions (1): ‘... the issue of information security cannot in any way be separated from the need to increase protection of personal data and to protect freedoms, as safeguarded by the European Convention on Human Rights’.

1.4 The EESC stresses that users need interconnected systems that guarantee protection of individual, industrial and administrative data. A European legal system for prosecuting those abusing networks and data and imposing penalties should be set up without delay; to this end, work is needed on making the EU’s legal procedures interoperable too.

1.5 The EESC feels that the measures taken are as yet insufficient to avoid market fragmentation and to give a network of interconnected, interactive and accessible public administrations a genuine pan-European dimension.

1.6 The EESC calls for the ISA programme to be flanked by a substantial Community initiative committing the Member States and the Commission to binding instruments giving new certainty and vigour to a reinforced Common Interoperability Framework.

1.7 In addition to the common framework, it is essential for the new European Interoperability Strategy to define Community policy priorities requiring efforts to be stepped up in the area of framework instruments and common services, as well as clear budget forecasts.

1.8 The EESC believes digital convergence needs to be achieved which ensures:

— fully interoperable equipment, platforms and services;

— security and reliability rules;

— identity and rights management;

— accessibility and ease of use;

— use of linguistically-neutral technical architectures and IT systems; and

— a major assistance and continuous-training initiative for users, particularly the weakest groups (1),

to prevent ‘digital exclusion’ and ensure high levels of reliability and confidence in the relationship between users and service providers.

1.9 The EESC feels there is a need for greater coordination and cooperation with other Community programmes helping to develop new ideas and solutions in the field of pan-European interoperability.

1.10 The EESC stresses the importance, particularly in the field of government, of open software, to guarantee the security and durability of software, the confidentiality of information or payments and the availability of the source code. It feels that the use of open-source software should be encouraged as it enables software solutions which are of great value to public administrations to be studied, changed, redistributed and reused.

1.11 The EESC feels that the reference European interoperability framework needs to be consolidated under a multidimensional approach covering political aspects (a joint vision of shared priorities), legal aspects (synchronising law-making), and technical, linguistic and organisational aspects.

1.12 The EESC believes that a European method of calculating the value for money provided by interoperable PEGS put in place by public administrations needs to be introduced.

1.13 The EESC considers that an information and training campaign is a pre-requisite for the success of the initiative. European-level social and civil dialogue and regular pan-European on-line services conferences are also essential to disseminate, support and give direction to the work of administrations in the various countries in a joint development framework.

2. Introduction

2.1 The rapid developments in the information and communication technologies sector since the early nineties have completely transformed the interactive framework in which public administrations, the business and employment world and the public operate. The levels of integration achieved in the European internal market have given unprecedented impetus to cross-border aspects of egovernment services.

2.2 The EESC has recently stressed that ‘Public authorities switching to digital services will have to modernise, by improving the quality, flexibility and quantity of the services they deliver, aiming for efficient use of public resources, cost-cutting, user satisfaction, coordination between public administrations and less bureaucracy’ (2).

2.3 Convergence and interoperability are one of the key aspects of a European government strategy, as stressed in the 2005 Manchester Declaration (3).

2.4 The EESC has commented on these issues several times (4), as well as on numerous legislative initiatives which require interoperability structures such as the Services Directive (2006/123/EC), the Public Procurement Directive (2004/18/EC), the INSPIRE Directive (2007/2/EC) and the Public Sector Information (PSI) Directive (2003/98/EC).

2.5 On a number of further occasions (5) the EESC has supported the Commission initiatives launching the programmes on electronic interchange of data between administrations: IDA I (1995-1999), IDA II (1999-2004) and IDABC (2005-2009), which were the precursors to the current proposal for a decision relating to the new programme: ISA - Interoperability Solutions for European public Administrations (2010-2015).

(1) ‘Weakest groups’ refers both to young people and the elderly, who have little training in using the Internet, and to those who do not have the financial wherewithal necessary for access to the Internet.


2.6 The EESC pointed out that 'The interoperability of information systems, the sharing and re-use of information, and the joining-up of administrative processes are essential for the provision of high quality, interactive, user-centric eGovernment services' (1), emphasising in particular the following points:

— the importance of reinforcing European initiatives, not only for the benefit of administrations and institutions, but also for that of the public, businesses and, more generally, of organised civil society;

— the need for an effective EU certification authority, in order to secure adequate levels of security for access to and the exchange of information;

— the importance of securing maximum visibility, accessibility and interoperability for end users of the networks;

— the need to promote initiatives at various levels in order to ensure continuous training of users and to open up the above-mentioned network infrastructure for the purposes of continuous training;

— the need, given the sensitivity of the data being handled, to guarantee levels of network security by means of suitable safeguards and, where necessary, secure transmission protocols, both at the central and at the peripheral level.

2.7 Moreover, the working documents accompanying the Communication on A single market for 21st Century Europe of 20 November 2007 – on which the EESC commented (2) – include numerous references to interoperability tools in respect of electronic interchange of data: the on-line network SOLVIT; the Internal Market Information System (IMI), the rapid alert system for dangerous products RAPEX; and TRACES, the system for traceability of live animals and a rapid alert response in the event of animal illness.

2.8 Various studies (3) have, however, revealed the existence of numerous obstacles to achieving full cross-border, cross-sector interoperability for public administrations: lack of coordination, lack of organisational flexibility, disparities between institutional responsibilities, divergent legal frameworks, different cultural and political approaches, insufficient dialogue with industry, failure to fully exploit results obtained and language barriers.

2.9 The EESC therefore believes that coordination endeavours must be further stepped up to promote interconnectivity, interoperability and accessibility, so as to derive full benefit from the European economic area without borders, with a minimum core of common specifications and solutions and effective use of open standards.

3. The Commission proposal

3.1 The Commission proposal seeks – through the launch of an Interoperability Solutions for European public Administrations (ISA) programme – to facilitate efficient and effective electronic cross-border and cross-sector interaction between European public administrations, enabling the delivery of electronic public services supporting the implementation of Community policies and activities, with regard to the single market in particular, and preventing the emergence of electronic barriers which differ among Member States.

3.2 The ISA programme is intended to support:

— establishment and improvement of common frameworks in support of interoperability across borders and sectors;

— assessment of ICT implications of proposed or adopted Community legislation as well as the planning of the implementation of ICT systems in support of the implementation of such legislation;

— operation and improvement of existing common services as well as the establishment, industrialisation, operation and improvement of new common services;

— improvement of existing reusable generic tools as well as the establishment, provision and improvement of new reusable generic tools.

3.3 The financial envelope for the implementation of the ISA programme for the period 2010-2015 is set at EUR 164.1 million, of which EUR 103.5 million is for the period until 31 December 2013 as laid down in the financial programming for 2007-2013, and EUR 60.6 million for the period 2014-2015.

(1) See Opinion CESE on eGovernment services, rapporteur: Mr Pezzini, OJ C 80 of 30.3.2004, page 83.
(2) See Opinion CESE on A single market for 21st century Europe, rapporteur: Mr Cassidy, co-rapporteurs: Mr Hencks and Mr Cappellini, not yet published in the Official Journal.
(3) See www.egovbarriers.org
4. General comments

4.1 The EESC firmly supports the initiatives seeking to ensure full, effective operation of the enlarged European single market. It believes that it is essential for the practical implementation of the freedoms laid down in the Treaty for interoperability mechanisms to be fully implemented, benefiting not just administrations and institutions but also the public, businesses and organised civil society in general.

4.2 The EESC feels that – despite the implementation of three successive multi-annual programmes, IDA I, IDA II and IDABC – the measures taken are as yet insufficient to avoid market fragmentation and to give interconnected public administrations a genuine pan-European dimension so that they can deliver services uninhibited by barriers and free of discrimination to preserve market unity and fully implement the rights of the public and Community businesses throughout the EU.

4.3 The EESC supports the Commission’s initiative to launch the ISA programme, provided that it consists of more than merely extending and renewing funding for the successive programmes which have been implemented between 1993 and the present day, and ensures a genuine, effective ‘European Interoperability Strategy’ and a ‘European Interoperability Framework’(1), which are essential for an integrated single market and a competitive, sustainable European economy under the renewed Lisbon agenda.

4.4 The EESC calls for the ISA programme to be flanked by a substantial Community initiative committing the Member States and the Commission to binding instruments giving new certainty and vigour to a European Interoperability Strategy and a European Interoperability Framework which can secure certain, transparent common procedures for public and private operators and for national and cross-border users.

4.5 In addition to the common framework, the EESC believes it is essential for the new European Interoperability Strategy to define Community political priorities, so as to achieve genuine implementation of the proposed directives and regulation being prepared.

4.6 The EESC feels that there is still insufficient coordination and cooperation with other Community programmes helping to develop new ideas and solutions relating to pan-European interoperability, in particular with the Competitiveness and Innovation Framework Programme (ICT PSP) and the Seventh Community Framework Programme for RTD. It recommends that an inter-programme interoperability committee be set up, bringing together managers from all the programmes involved, to coordinate drawing-up of calls for tender.

4.7 The EESC believes that the full compatibility of new operational frameworks with the principles of pan-European interoperability should be verified right from their conception by public administrations; prior notification mechanisms could be used such as those adopted for the drawing-up of new technical standards (2). The main obstacle is still cultural: there are still administrations which are not yet ready and have yet to be convinced of the need to accept open technological and innovative solutions within a European interoperability framework.

4.8 The EESC considers that an information and training campaign is a pre-requisite for the success of the initiative, along with regular pan-European on-line services conferences to ensure ongoing monitoring and redirection of the work programme, for example by benchmarking of administrations at various levels.

4.9 Digital convergence calls for: interoperable equipment, platforms and services; security and reliability rules; identity and rights management (3); accessibility and ease of use; use of linguistically-neutral technical architectures and IT systems, along with a major continuous-training initiative for users, particularly the weakest groups, to prevent social exclusion.

4.10 The EESC stresses the importance, particularly in the field of egovernment, of ‘open software’, to ‘guarantee the security and durability of software’, the confidentiality of ‘information or payments’ and the availability of the ‘source code’, to ‘guarantee it is maintained, stable and secure, even if the publisher goes out of business’ (4).

4.11 The EESC believes that a European method of calculating the value for money provided by interoperable PEGS (5) put in place by public administrations needs to be introduced; this should take into account not just return on investment and gains in respect of property, flexibility and cutting red tape, but also, in particular, the overall value in terms of providing the public and businesses with a barrier-free, reliable single market.

(1) See Article 8 of the proposal, COM(2008) 583 final.


(5) PEGS = Pan-European e-Government Services.
4.12 The EESC feels that the reference European interoperability framework needs to be consolidated under a multidimensional approach covering political aspects (a joint vision of shared priorities), legal aspects (synchronising law-making) and technical, linguistic and organisational aspects.

4.13 The EESC believes that it would be good practice for national administrations to launch a social dialogue at European level as part of the EUPAN/TUNED (1) informal dialogue, with staff representatives from the administrations concerned, in order to give people the information they need to be involved.

4.14 As regards new and existing generic instruments in the context of the GPSCM (2) defined by the Commission together with the Member States:

— roles, rights and responsibilities of data owners, providers and users need to be clearly defined in a common, cross-border dimension using a standardised, uniform joint approach;

— public administrations need to adopt this model as an integral part of their endeavours, to include in their interoperability systems joint performance-assessment systems which can be applied to cross-border flows;

— national identification, authentication and certification infrastructures need to be set up or reinforced to ensure high levels of reliability and confidence in the relationship between users and service providers.

4.15 The EESC feels that a common framework needs to be defined for CEN, CENELEC and ETSI open technical standards in this field, enabling them to be applied to all concerned.

4.16 The EESC believes that the use of open-source software should be encouraged as it allows for the study, change, redistribution and reuse of software solutions which are of great value to public administrations in terms of cost-effectiveness, verification of application of standards, operational cover beyond the limits imposed by licences and copyright, long-term sustainability of solutions adopted and adaptation to local needs.


The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Mario SEPPI

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(1) EUPAN: European Public Administration Network – current name of the informal network of directors-general responsible for public administration in the EU; TUNED: Trade Unions’ National and European administration Delegation.

(2) GPSCM = Generic Public Services Conceptual Model.