

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the ‘Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: European eGovernment Action Plan 2016-2020 — Accelerating the digital transformation of government’

(COM(2016)179 final)

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Section responsible	Transport, Energy, Infrastructure and the Information Society
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Outcome of vote (for/against/abstentions)	162/1/3

1. Conclusions and recommendations

1.1. The European Union’s goal of establishing eGovernment providing personalised and user-friendly end-to-end digital services without borders by 2020 hardly seems feasible at the rate that the successive action plans on the subject are currently being implemented in a large number of Member States.

1.2. The EESC supports the proposals of the 3rd European Action Plan (2016-2020) aimed at speeding up implementation of efficient, interoperable and universally accessible eGovernment.

1.3. EGovernment can only work if other prerequisites, such as the provision of an efficient network and digital services, universal, affordable access and adequate digital training for users of all levels and ages, are met. Whilst eGovernment is supposed to become the default means of communication in the medium or long term, traditional means of communicating with public administrations (postal delivery, personal contact, telephone) should be maintained for members of the public who wish to use them.

1.4. As regards the rights of eGovernment users, particularly rights of access and non-discrimination, freedom of expression and information, protection of privacy and personal data, education and general knowledge from school education to life-long learning, appeal procedures, etc., the EESC proposes that the Commission bring together all the rights of eGovernment users on a single website.

1.5. The EESC endorses the seven principles on which the Commission proposal is based, but doubts whether some of them can be implemented without the relevant legal and technological problems being resolved.

1.6. As regards the ‘once only’ principle, according to which individuals and businesses should not have to supply the same information to public administrations more than once, the EESC notes that there are still unresolved legal and organisational problems and calls on the Commission to launch a pilot scheme in this area. It also proposes making provision for the ‘whole-of-government approach’, which involves collaboration between the different public bodies that extends beyond their respective fields of competence with a view to providing the public with a combined response from a single body.

1.7. The EESC also regrets that the 'no legacy' principle, which involves renewing IT systems and technologies in public administrations so as to keep pace with technological developments, does not feature among the adopted principles.

1.8. It insists, under the principle of 'openness and transparency', on citizens and businesses having an explicit right to control the transmission of their personal data to other public administrations and, where appropriate, to delete them (right to be forgotten), in keeping with the relevant legislation and procedures, and urges the Commission to submit a proposal for a secure European archive and online document exchange system.

1.9. Since many citizens need to familiarise themselves with the new eGovernment tool, the EESC believes that Member States and their regional and local authorities should provide citizens with digital skills training and be asked to provide a digital help service or a local support service to be co-financed by EU funds. This also applies to public sector employees as part of their ongoing professional training.

1.10. The EESC very much regrets that the action plan makes no reference whatsoever to the social implications and consequences of eGovernment, or to the repercussions for employment, as regards both job losses and the many vacancies which cannot be filled for lack of candidates with the necessary digital professional qualifications. When redeploying posts freed up by the switchover to digital public administration, officials whose posts have been economised should be assigned to the assisted digital service or steered towards suitable roles.

2. Introduction

2.1. The European eGovernment Action Plan 2011-2015 (using ICT to promote smart, sustainable and innovative eGovernment)⁽¹⁾ expired in December 2015.

2.2. However, eGovernment is still a major area of development on the digital agenda, and one of the key initiatives needed to complete a 'single digital market' at both national and EU level

2.3. A number of initiatives set out in the action plan have yet to be duly implemented in many Member States and must be continued in the new Action Plan for eGovernment for 2016-2020.

2.4. Governments will therefore have to improve the design of their online services by focusing more on users' needs to ensure the functioning of effective and efficient eGovernment services across national borders.

3. Content of the Communication

3.1. The new action plan, which focuses on accelerating digital transformation, is intended to serve as a catalyst, and will make it possible to coordinate public sector modernisation efforts and resources in the field of eGovernment.

3.2. The action plan comprises 20 actions, a non-exhaustive list which can be accomplished progressively in line with developments in a rapidly changing environment by means of other measures, proposed either by the Commission or by stakeholders.

3.3. The initiatives to be launched under the new action plan will have to comply with the following overarching principles:

- **digital by default:** digital services should become the norm, while other communication channels should be kept for those who, by choice or out of necessity, are not connected. In addition, public services should be provided via a single point of contact or one-stop shop which acts as an intermediary, and through a variety of channels,
- **once only principle:** under this principle, individuals and businesses should not have to provide the same information to public administrations more than once,

⁽¹⁾ COM(2010) 743 final and COM(2010) 744 final.

- inclusiveness and accessibility: public administrations should design digital public services which are inclusive by default and cater for different needs such as those of the elderly and people with disabilities,
- openness and transparency: public administrations should share information and data between themselves and enable citizens and businesses to access, control and correct their own data; enable users to monitor administrative processes that involve them; and engage with and open up to stakeholders (such as businesses, researchers and non-profit organisations) in the design and delivery of services,
- cross-border by default: public administrations should make relevant digital public services available across borders and prevent further fragmentation from arising, thereby facilitating mobility within the single market,
- interoperability by default: public services should be designed to work seamlessly across the Single Market and across organisational silos, relying on the free movement of data and digital services in the European Union,
- reliability and security: all initiatives should go beyond mere compliance with the legal framework on personal data protection and privacy and IT security, by integrating those elements in the design phase.

4. General comments

4.1. The EESC supports the Commission's efforts to speed up the development and uptake of eGovernment services. Since the first Action Plan for eGovernment in 2006, the Member States have been committed to promoting effective, efficient, interoperable and universally accessible eGovernment services, including online cross-border services. These commitments were confirmed in the context of the digital single market strategy to be implemented by 2020.

4.2. However, it is clear that despite some progress, as reflected in the assessments of the 2011-2015 Action Plan, and despite substantial Community financial resources made available but little used by the Member States, users are still faced — to varying degrees depending on the Member States — with fragmented modernisation of Member State public administrations and insufficient supply of online cross-border services. The EESC wonders why the EU funds made available remain severely underutilised and asks the Commission to carry out an analysis of this issue, to remove any barriers and to encourage Member States to use these funds effectively and efficiently, including with regard to eGovernment.

4.3. eGovernment is one of the key aspects of the digital single market strategy. However, other key aspects of the digital sector, which are not dealt with in this communication, are a prerequisite for implementing eGovernment. Thus, it is clear that state-of-the-art networks and digital services must be available to citizens of all ages and to businesses, who must have universal access at an affordable price, irrespective of their geographical or financial situation and that, where appropriate, be provided with assistance and training in order to acquire the skills needed to take advantage of digital applications effectively and responsibly.

4.4. Another key element is that of the rights of eGovernment users, which are based, first and foremost, on human rights and the fundamental freedoms that apply to internet users, particularly rights of access and non-discrimination, freedom of expression and information, protection of privacy and personal data, education and general knowledge from school education to life-long learning, appeal procedures, etc., as well as specific rights directly related to eGovernment. Given the different sources of the rights enjoyed by eGovernment users, the EESC proposes that the Commission bring together all the rights of eGovernment users on a single website.

4.5. Given that users often find it difficult to find the online information and assistance that they need, the Commission proposes the creation of a one-stop-shop/Single Digital Gateway, at both EU and national level. Single gateways of this kind are already operating in most Member States and local and regional authorities. The EESC supports the creation of such an access point for national central, regional or local public administration, in order to redirect users directly to the competent authorities able to deal with their requests or requirements.

4.6. The 2016-2020 Action Plan is based on seven principles which were largely already in force under the previous action plans. Whilst the EESC endorses these principles in general, it nevertheless wonders how they can be implemented before the relevant legal issues (management of personal data and protection of privacy in an open government context) and technological problems (enabling and industrial technologies, migration of services to digital channels) have been resolved.

4.7. The new action plan focuses on interoperability and the reuse of data held by public administrations, as much of the information currently collected by public administrations is used only once or for a very limited purpose. Under the 'once only' principle, users will no longer have to resubmit their current details every time they contact public administrations. The authorities will be able to share that information with other public administrations, with due respect for the protection of personal data and privacy. In accordance with this principle, business registers throughout the EU should be connected, the various national and cross-border systems should work together and administrations would no longer have to ask repeatedly for information they already have. Whilst the Data Protection Regulation remains applicable with regard to eGovernment, the EESC believes that it is necessary to ensure a balance between monitoring under the rule of law and the security and freedom of citizens.

4.8. The new Commission approach is to keep pace with a rapidly changing environment. However, the EESC notes that the 'no legacy' principle, which involves renewing IT systems and technologies in public administrations so as to keep abreast of technological developments, does not feature among the seven adopted principles, pending its testing by the Commission for possible implementation.

4.9. The Commission states that it wishes to emphasise the involvement of individuals in the creation of digital public services and, in line with the 'openness and transparency' principle, calls on public administrations to engage with citizens, businesses, representatives of the social partners and consumers, researchers and non-profit organisations in the design and delivery of services.

4.10. Individuals will thus be able to make suggestions and address specific questions directly to the Commission and the Member States using a 'collaborative platform' which will connect individuals and authorities and make it possible to identify similar problems in different countries and determine good practice and solutions for administrations to introduce. The EESC supports such an initiative, which will allow each individual to provide feedback to national, regional or local authorities on the problems encountered in his or her environment.

4.11. The principle of 'openness and transparency' requires public administrations to share information and data and allow individuals and businesses to access their data and to check and correct it. Regarding personal data, the EESC insists that citizens and businesses have an explicit right to control the transmission of their personal data to other public administrations and, where appropriate, to have these deleted (right to be forgotten), in keeping with the relevant legislation and procedures.

4.12. The EESC believes that in this connection the Commission will have to submit a proposal for a secure European archive and online document exchange system to avoid further incompatibility.

4.13. A principle which is not referred to in the action plan is the 'whole-of-government approach', which involves collaboration between the different public bodies that extends beyond their fields of competence with a view to providing individuals with a combined response from a single body.

4.14. The EESC urges the Commission to accelerate the introduction of the 'one-stop-shop' for eJustice, and for the maritime and other transport sectors. The future strategy should seek to amalgamate as much as possible the existing European portals (such as [eJustice](#), [solvit](#) and [youreurope](#)) into one single portal, and then, most importantly, to extend it to the national portals with the aim of simplifying all kinds of administrative procedures.

4.15. Although the EESC agrees with the idea that Member States and their regional and local authorities need to focus on these portals in the future in order to develop their online services, it stresses that these portals must continue to be a complementary service to physical points of contact and traditional means of communication (postal delivery, face-to-face over the counter exchanges, telephone).

4.16. The United Nations uses a development index based on three criteria to determine in which countries eGovernment is the most developed: online services for citizens, telecommunications infrastructure and human capital. It is clear that the action plan makes no reference whatsoever to the social implications and consequences of eGovernment, or to the repercussions for employment, as regards both job losses and the many vacancies which cannot be filled for lack of candidates with the necessary digital professional qualifications.

4.17. Providing services online by default is not a substitute for fighting the digital divide.

4.18. There are still large disparities between, on the one hand, the eGovernment services available and, on the other hand, the use and uptake of these services by users. This reluctance of users to take advantage of online services is often due to a lack of digital skills. Many citizens need to familiarise themselves with the new eGovernment tool and need an 'assisted digital service' or local support. This also applies to public sector employees as part of their ongoing professional training.

4.19. The EESC believes that Member States and their local and regional authorities should be urged to provide citizens with digital skills training and be asked to provide a digital help service for citizens co-financed from EU funds. When redeploying posts freed up by the switchover to digital public administration, officials whose posts have been economised should be assigned to the assisted digital service or steered towards suitable roles.

Brussels, 22 September 2016.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Georges DASSIS
