

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the ‘Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council and the European Economic and Social Committee on a strategic vision for European standards: Moving forward to enhance and accelerate the sustainable growth of the European economy by 2020’

COM(2011) 311 final

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On 1 June 2011 the Commission decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 304 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, on the

Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council and the European Economic and Social Committee on A strategic vision for European standards: Moving forward to enhance and accelerate the sustainable growth of the European economy by 2020

COM(2011) 311 final.

The Section for the Single Market, Production and Consumption, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 19 December 2011.

At its 477th plenary session, held on 18 and 19 January 2012 (meeting of 19 January 2012), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 158 votes to 6 with 2 abstentions.

1. Conclusions and recommendations

1.1 The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) is a committed supporter of the Europe 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth and welcomes the Commission's initiative. In particular, the adoption of common EU standards contributes to the development of a competitive single market with interoperable and innovative standards-based products and services.

1.2 Standards can be considered as the heritage of our civilisation: they represent current and past knowledge; they have to be progressive in order to properly evolve. The time required to develop standards should be reduced in order to always reflect society's needs. The EESC supports the Commission's efforts to reduce this period by 50 % by 2020 without, however, this being carried out in a uniform fashion and without calling into question the necessary and sometimes lengthy consultation of stakeholders. These consultations are conducted more effectively at national level and are usefully complemented by the direct action of specialist European organisations.

1.3 Participation in standardisation should be as important as participation in the legislative process. Greater participation by consumers, SMEs and other stakeholders is needed and can be achieved through financial support. A peer review by interested stakeholders of national standard could ensure that society's interests are represented at all levels.

1.4 Standards in public procurement are essential to implement the single market correctly.

1.5 The EESC confirms its previous view: 'specifications adopted by international industry forums and/or consortia, in the ICT sector, should only be accepted after a process of approval by European standardisation organisations (ESOs), involving representatives of SMEs, consumers, environmental organisations, workers and organisations with strong social interests' ⁽¹⁾.

1.6 The Commission proposes several actions in different fields. As standardisation is a very important tool to support industrial policy, innovation and competitiveness, the EESC supports the proposed actions, especially the ones related to the role of the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission intended to verify that scientific standards fit with the requirements of the European and national economies in terms of competitiveness, social needs, safety/security concerns and the environmental impact (Actions 1-5 of the Communication).

1.7 On societal interest, the Commission foresees specific attention being devoted to safety, security and protection, asking Member States to ensure the genuine involvement of consumers, environmental associations and disabled and elderly people. The EESC considers these proposals to be of great value (Actions 6-9).

⁽¹⁾ OJ C 376, 22.12.2011, p. 58.

1.8 The EESC has always supported the involvement of and an effective role for civil society organisations and fully agrees with the Commission and its initiative to enlarge and ensure a more inclusive working process, both at national and European level, based on recognised criteria, such as the principles of the WTO agreement on Technical Barriers to Trade. Financial support should be provided to SME organisations, consumers, trade unions and other relevant stakeholders (Actions 10-15).

1.9 Chapter 5 of the Communication is dedicated to the development of standards in services: the EESC is in favour of the view expressed in that chapter and considers the idea of giving the responsibility to the High Level Group on Business Services, as proposed in the Communication 'Towards a Single Market Act', to be very helpful for all economic sectors, even beyond the services sector (Actions 16-18).

1.10 The EESC recognises the particularity of the ICT market and the need for a rapid definition of standards, which would actually be developed by forums and consortia. As stated, a genuinely inclusive process should validate these standards. The creation of a multi-stakeholder forum is to be welcomed. The EESC recommends that this forum be held on regular basis and not only for a single initiative. The EESC would like to be part of this forum.

Standards in ICT are essential in public e-Procurement and in e-Government in general. It is crucial to guarantee the interoperability of ICT (Actions 19-23).

1.11 The final proposals underline the role of Europe in international standardisation and the active initiative announced by the Commission. The EESC is in favour of the proposed actions and considers it crucial for the EU interest to play a very active part in the international activities, endorsing the Commission decisions to support ESOs in their work on a bilateral and multilateral basis (Actions 24-28).

1.12 The independent review, which is to be launched by 2013 at the latest, is based on the interest of the Commission in evaluating progress and compliance with the targets: industrial policy, innovation and technological development, from the point of view of the market's needs, of inclusivity and of representativity. The EESC fully agrees with this proposal (Action 29).

2. General comments

2.1 An efficient European standardisation system will essentially allow interoperable products and services to be created, which can be offered seamlessly within the EU, not just in cross-border scenarios, but also at local, regional or national levels.

2.2 The EESC agrees that standards are effective policy tools and that they can contribute to the proper functioning of the Single Market, particularly in the field of ICT and services, in which process and production standards are developing.

2.3 The EESC strongly supports the use of standards in public procurement, as this will trigger the supply of standards-based product and services. Public procurers in the EU should employ global or European standards, if available, in any product or service request, while the use of proprietary standards and non-interoperable products or services should be strongly discouraged.

2.4 Noting the importance of permanently removing barriers to trade, the EESC appreciates the commitment of all national standards bodies in Member States to implement European standards as identical national standards and to withdraw existing national standards that conflict with these, and not to take actions in the future that could undermine this harmonisation.

2.5 The EESC agrees that the European standardisation process should be accelerated, simplified, modernised and made more inclusive. The use of specific strict deadlines, expert resources and the effective participation of all interested stakeholders (especially SMEs, consumers and other societal stakeholders who are often weak or absent at national level) should be included in EC requests for standards and funding.

2.5.1 Participation at national level is very important as well. The proposals from the national standardisation bodies form the basis for a European standard. It is easier for consumers and SMEs to contribute at national level.

2.6 Since standardisation is a voluntary process driven by the market and its success depends primarily on acceptance by the market, the EESC emphasises the importance of better involvement of SMEs, even through their associations, in all phases of standardisation: consultations on new projects including mandates, development of standards and the final vote, both at national and European level.

3. Specific comments

3.1 Consideration relating to ESOs ⁽²⁾

3.2 The EESC acknowledges the considerable reduction in the average development time of European standards made in recent years. Nevertheless, further reductions should be made,

⁽²⁾ ESOs: European standardisation bodies. The three official European standardisation bodies are CEN, CENELEC and ETSI.

but not at the expense of inclusivity or quality. The Commission is also urged to improve and accelerate its procedures for the development of standardisation mandates and the referencing of harmonised standards in the Official Journal of the EU. The EESC welcomes the Commissioner's stated intention to reduce the length of the process by 50 % by 2020.

3.2.1 The membership of ESO working groups and Technical Committees must be better balanced, representing all market parties for the standardisation topic in question. Some funding should be provided in order to ensure that micro-enterprises, consumers and other societal stakeholders and their associations attend workshops. The EESC supports the decision to revise and rationalise the current system of incentives and financial supports to expand opportunities for all interested stakeholders to participate. A unified regulation of existing tools will be very welcome.

3.2.2 Proper oversight is required in order to prevent any duplication of work or outcomes across working groups at EU level (funded by the European Commission).

3.2.3 NSB require the full involvement of Member States, particularly political backing, as well as technical and financial resources, to allow for the participation of all the stakeholders.

3.2.4 While one of the key benefits of standardisation is the opportunity to provide interoperable products and services, a clear mechanism and tools for testing and validating EU standards should be established in order to ensure faster product development cycles.

3.2.5 In response to an 'Ageing Europe', European standardisation also has a key role to play in ensuring the delivery of safe and accessible products and services to consumers of all ages and abilities. This is especially important when considering the importance of European standards in supporting public procurement contracts.

3.3 **Implementation Guidelines** - Some international standardisation bodies do not produce implementation guidelines for using the standards developed. ESOs should meet that need, producing clear and concise implementation guidelines in order to ensure ease of implementation.

SMEs will be able to gain access to markets in which common standards are used, reducing complexities and costs for SMEs and improving competition.

Encourage the use of EU standards where national standards are lacking or ensure convergence of national standards with EU standards, by providing clear roadmaps.

3.4 **Awareness and representation for SMEs:** targeted workshops, training and awareness-raising activities should be deployed at regional and national level, since SMEs can be reached more easily through local industry or SME associations and public administrations.

3.4.1 SMEs are often unaware of the mechanism for developing standards and simply accept products with pre-defined standards embedded. SME associations at national and EU level often do not have the resources required to provide input into standardisation developments, thus further reducing their influence.

3.4.2 The EESC agrees that the position of European associations representing SMEs and societal stakeholders should be strengthened. Voting rights for EU SME associations and societal stakeholders in ESOs should be given serious consideration. The EESC is interested in participating in this debate, which is controversial at the moment, given that the ESOs are private bodies.

3.4.3 The EESC appreciates the work carried out, with the financial support of the European Commission, by NORMAPME as the European Association representing crafts and SMEs in standardisation and by ANEC, representing the consumers.

3.4.4 To raise awareness and increase use of standards, the EESC suggests that standardisation organisations at EU and national level provide potential users with simplified access to standards, including a summary of their content. If the use of standards is made mandatory through legislation, the legislator must take care to ensure that these standards are just as easily accessible as the legislation itself.

3.5 **Education:** Standardisation concepts should be included in the curricula of European secondary schools and universities. Specific incentives for students and researchers to develop standards-based interoperable solutions and applications should be supported. For example, EU funding for students and researchers as single entities, or as cross-border groups, should be easily granted.

3.5.1 The Commission should monitor innovation trends by working closely with the ICT industry, research centres and universities, in order to ensure that standards are developed in line with product/service innovation. The Work Programme for Standardisation should cater for this, prioritising actions based on market adoption behaviours and needs.

3.6 Standards represent a voluntary process of assessing the needs, requirements and rules to be met in order to facilitate the acceptance of related products and services. However, these rules evolve into standards only when they gain market acceptance through wide user adoption. Balanced stakeholder requirements and consensus should therefore be the foundations of any standardisation work. However, it is mainly large private and public companies that participate in the development of standards, resulting in unbalanced stakeholder representation.

3.7 Standardisation is an important tool for competitiveness. The EESC calls on Member States to provide an effective national standardisation framework, able to contribute to the development of European and international standards, and able to provide standardisation solutions for exclusively national needs.

3.8 NSBs should be strengthened. However, this greatly depends on national industrial policy and the degree of national commitment therefore varies across countries. Specific incentives could be developed, coupled with a communication campaign on best practices from EU Member States which view standards as a strategic asset for their competitiveness.

3.9 The EESC agrees on the crucial role of the development of **standards for services**. However, it is crucial to ensure that service standards are market driven and consensus-based.

3.9.1 National standards may create obstacles to the achievement of a single market. It is crucial that standards are

developed at EU level before Member States begin to develop country-specific standards which are often non-interoperable.

3.10 The EESC strongly supports the European Commission's actions relating to ICT standards and interoperability. In particular, this concerns the possibility of employing widely accepted ICT standards in public procurement in order to create demand for interoperable services led by the public sector, which will act as a key driver for standardisation.

3.10.1 As already proposed, 'the Committee considers it essential that the ESOs and the Commission carry out preliminary checks to ensure that specifications adopted by international industry forums and/or consortia, to be used as a reference for the purpose of public procurement, have been developed in a neutral, fair and transparent manner with appropriate involvement of representatives of small and medium-sized enterprises, consumers, environmentalists, workers and organisations representing important social interests'.

3.11 The EESC is also sceptical about the proposal with a view to improving global competitiveness; policies and standards should be supported by legislation, not the opposite. Standardisation should not hamper innovation and development.

3.12 Standards-based products and/or services resulting from successful EU-funded initiatives should be incorporated into subsequent related EU initiatives with a view to eliminating duplication and promoting further expansion/adoption of those standards.

Brussels, 19 January 2012.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Staffan NILSSON
