

Conference
Tuesday 16 June 2015 – Riga

DIGITAL SINGLE MARKET STRATEGY: A NEW START

Debriefing

The European Economic and Social Committee held a Digital Agenda - Going Local Conference entitled "*Digital single market strategy: a new start*" in Riga on 16 June, in cooperation with the Latvian Information and Communications Technology Association and the Chamber of Commerce and Industry. With nearly 100 participants, well-known and high-level speakers, interactive debates with the audience, and with the participation of representatives from the Latvian Government, NATO, Lattelecom, the Latvian Information and Communications Technology Association, the European Commission and EESC members, this conference was undoubtedly a great success.

In the opening remarks, after recalling the words of Commission Vice-President for the Digital Single Market, Andrus Ansip: "(...) *The Strategy is our starting point, not the finishing line*", it was stressed that the Digital Single Market Strategy was one of the three priority axes that Latvia had set out in connection with its Presidency of the Council of the European Union. European Union ministers in the Competitiveness Council had highlighted that, to achieve this objective, it was particularly important to ensure appropriate copyright regulation, renew provisions for e-commerce, promote digital skills and interoperability, and ensure data protection and trust.

The Latvian IT sector is dynamic and growing quickly; it employs over 30 thousand specialists within a population of roughly 2 million. The sector's turnover in 2013 was EUR 3.1 billion, 34% of which came from export of goods and services. Latvia has achieved a great deal: for example, 57% of Latvians are using online banking, while the EU average is 44%. 54% of Latvian citizens are using e-government, surpassing the EU average of 47%. Latvia has advanced infrastructure, with a 40% share of fixed broadband of 100 Mbps or higher, in comparison with the EU average of 9%. In the country there are more than 4 000 free wi-fi hotspots. However, there are also areas that have to be improved. For example, a recent study shows that only 6.9% of SMEs in Latvia make sales online, while the EU average is 15%. Latvian SMEs have to be more active when it comes to integrating technology into their work and participating in e-commerce. Taking another example, only 6% of doctors in Latvia use e-prescriptions, while the EU average is 27%.

In the first session, the discussion highlighted the benefit of the initiative of "digital by default" strategy. This would imply that all legislation and services will be built with the digital age in mind. In particular, it involves making specified interactions between government and users digital by default, as this reduces the administrative burden for government, as well as for users by saving them

time. It was also pointed out that a large number of ICT practitioners are not computer science graduates, but have only received training on the job, which is often inadequate.

Then the discussion turned to the topic of inclusion in the Digital Agenda: 35% of the EU population are at risk of exclusion (80 million with disabilities and 190 million aged over 50); one in three people with disabilities has never used the internet, and, due to the rapid development of technology, many of these people are very unlikely to take full advantage of the Digital Single Market. The topic of inclusion can be summarised with the "three A": Accessibility, Availability and Affordability. Accessibility refers to having a physical or technical way to use digital services (for example specialised devices or services for specific disabilities); availability refers to the actual availability of these devices, and affordability to the pricing of such devices or services (which at the moment are very expensive).

The discussion during the second session stressed that the digital society entails a revolution in terms of employment and training: two out of three future jobs do not even exist yet, and we already know that almost all jobs will require digital skills. The European Union faces a shortfall of 900 000 skilled candidates for ICT sector jobs in the near term, and the OECD 2013 Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) shows that much of the population does not have the experience or basic skills necessary to use ICT in many day-to-day tasks. Emphasis was placed on legal protection for workers, as well as for consumers and citizens, on the nature of, and security at, work, employment contracts and collective agreements, protection of consumer rights, protection of fundamental citizens' rights and ways of ensuring inclusion for all, beginning at school.

The European Union needs a European education policy that will offer women and men lifelong learning, and there must be a particular focus on training. Moreover, a policy change is particularly necessary because of an alarming decline in the number of ICT graduates: currently only 29 out of every 1 000 university-educated women have a degree in an ICT-related subject and only 4 go on to work in ICT-related activities. The percentage of women in higher education exceeds that of men, yet they still experience disadvantages when it comes to jobs, salaries, working conditions and access to positions with more responsibility. Women occupy just 10% of senior positions in European universities.

Then the discussion moved on to the importance of cybersecurity for the world economy, which is based on cyber networks. The risks and benefits of using modern versus old technologies were mentioned, citing the example of certain governments which switched to typewriters for the drafting of secret documents after the Snowden scandal.

The closing remarks, based on a broad analysis, including that set out above, summarised the two main conclusions:

- the digital market will not work if participants do not trust it, so a balance must be found between, on the one hand, the potential for economic use of data for the purposes of research or creating new services and, on the other, guaranteeing safety and privacy for individuals. Similarly, it should be noted that technology can both create and mitigate security risks;

- modern technology covers all industries and the better educated IT users are, the easier it will be for them to understand the opportunities and risks related to modern technology. It is therefore important to think about how to expand opportunities for people to increase their digital skills and develop lifelong learning, and how to have a balanced labour market and connect the education system with the economy.
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