

Commission guide: Digital single market is a 'golden opportunity' for Europe

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Feature

Andrus Ansip and Günther Oettinger believe that regaining citizens' trust will be key to unlocking the digital single market's huge potential.



Andrus Ansip, European commission vice-president for the digital single market, and Günther Oettinger, European digital economy and society commissioner, have high hopes for their portfolio. The digital single market "could create up to €250bn in additional growth, hundreds of thousands of new jobs, and a vibrant knowledge-based society". Taking advantage of this "golden opportunity" is clearly no easy feat, but the two officials have made it their mission to "break down national silos". In their view, "digital technologies know no borders - it does not make sense for each EU country to have its own rules for telecommunications services, copyright, or the management of radio spectrum".

Currently, "only 14 per cent of small and medium-sized businesses use the internet to sell online. Only 12 per cent of Europeans shop across borders. More than 90 per cent of Europeans are concerned about mobile apps collecting their data without their consent". The Estonian and German colleagues

highlight that these are only some of the challenges ahead, and say this is why "there is no time to waste. We have already started work on a clear long-term strategy - to stimulate the digital environment, to minimise legal uncertainty and create fair conditions for all". This strategy is expected to be adopted in May, with a legislative proposal on "the modernisation of copyright rules to make them fit for the digital age" due at the end of the year.

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Copyright rules are a key issue for the two commissioners, especially as they "vary a great deal around the EU's 28 countries". But they fully empathise with European citizens, saying, "it is more than frustrating when you are unable to access online material - music, films, anything that you have paid good money for - when you travel to another country and find yourself blocked from doing so". They both want "reform that strikes the right balance between the interests of users and authors".

Furthermore, they hope to implement "a telecoms single market as a strong basis for a digital single market. We have to end roaming charges once and for all, get the net neutrality principle enshrined into EU law and coordinate spectrum management". They also plan to look at the audiovisual sector, "checking whether the huge change it is currently undergoing due to content merging is still reflected in our existing legislation. If at the end of the year, we think that this is no longer the case, we will table a revision of the audiovisual media service directive, most probably in the first six months of 2016".

The pair add that the digital portfolio is so far -reaching that "more than 10 commissioners are involved - that's because digital is everywhere, stretching into all aspects of our lives - regional policy, internal market, trade and consumer policy, for example". And Oettinger and Ansip expect to receive MEPs' full support, saying, "we know the European parliament agrees with the ambitious plan to achieve a fully functioning digital single market, as can be seen in the recent resolution on supporting consumer rights in the digital single market and the support for the telecoms single market package". They both add that they believe in a "frank and open discussion discussion with parliament" and that "participation in plenary sessions as well as relevant committee meetings is essential".

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One key component of the digital single market is "search engines - we should discuss a broad range of measures, starting with transparency, self-preference and vertical services in this area". Of course, competition law is something the commission will be paying close attention to, but this is a task that will be delegated to competition commissioner Margrethe Vestager, "who will decide how to proceed with the ongoing investigation into Google's business practices, once she has heard those who are most directly affected by such practices". However, they insist that "this is not about going after successful US companies" and that the issue at hand is "not about dominance but about potential abuse of that dominant position".

For them, "the digital single market is about encouraging trust, choice, competition, growth and a secure, free flow of information and data cross-borders - it is not about fear of competition or blocking businesses". And while "Europe is innovative, one of the best places on earth for businesses and

consumers - we can do better".

For example, the commissioners believe that "Europe needs to move to a more paperless society, particularly in public services. Our public administration should be more open, effective and responsive to citizens and businesses. Rules such as the 'once only' principle where citizens do not need to give their information more than once to the government stimulate and force interoperability between systems, something we are lacking today. Steps have already been taken at the EU level: think about recent progress in electronic identification".

One of the main challenges in establishing the digital single market is "striking the right balance between keeping the internet open as a forum for freedom of expression, while also making sure it is not abused as a vehicle to fuel hatred". Data protection is currently top of Brussels' legislative agenda, and Ansip and Oettinger wish to "create a safer internet for Europe as we embrace the digital revolution - a more trustworthy environment for citizens and businesses". They both say "we cannot get the best out of the opportunities the internet offers if we do not trust it, or if we are unable to connect properly with each other". Above all, their current focus is "making sure that Europeans can benefit from the same freedoms and protections online as they have offline".

Andrus Ansip is European commission vice-president for the digital single market

Günther Oettinger is European digital economy and society commissioner

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