

Digital single market strategy lacks ambition

Written by Julie Levy-Abegnoli on 6 May 2015 in News
News

MEPs have been left underwhelmed by the commission's new digital single market strategy.



The commission has unveiled its European digital single market (DSM) strategy, which is set to focus on three pillars - 'access', 'environment' and 'economy and society'.

The strategy consists of 16 points, such as eCommerce, geoblocking and copyright. It also touches upon data privacy and security, telecoms rules and cloud services.

Stressing the need for such a strategy, European digital economy and society commissioner Günther Oettinger underlined that, "industry, citizens, all of us are going through a digital revolution which particularly impacts upon trade - we are devising a European strategy which will reinforce our digital authority and give us digital sovereignty - which we don't always have - and make us competitive globally".

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Currently, online shopping is faced with barriers such as differing prices from country to country or high delivery costs, which put both shoppers and sellers at a disadvantage. With the new strategy, the commission plans to simplify eCommerce rules across the member states.

In Oettinger's view, "the DSM should be good for citizens and users and make start-ups and the continued existence of these companies better, and make it possible for SMEs to have clear opportunities".

Facilitating eCommerce

"In terms of eTrade and eCommerce, we want more citizens to be able to do business across frontiers and be able to move within a European eCommerce market, as is currently the case at national level", he added.

As part of the college's efforts to improve eCommerce in the EU, it has launched an anti-trust competition enquiry into the sector, with European competition commissioner Margrethe Vestager pointing out that, "European citizens face too many barriers to accessing goods and services online across borders.

Some of these barriers are put in place by companies themselves. [...] My aim is to determine how widespread these barriers are and what effects they have on competition and consumers".

The commission has also announced plans to tackle the issue of geoblocking, whereby people are denied access to content based on their location, even if it is something they have paid for, or where they are unable to purchase something online because of where they live.

However, European commission vice-president for the digital single market Andrus Ansip made the distinction between 'justified' and 'unjustified' geoblocking, explaining that in cases where an activity was not legal in all member states - online gambling, for example - geoblocking was appropriate.

"We don't want to destroy [the system based on territoriality], but we have to allow our citizens cross-border access to content - this means I am in favour of territoriality, but I do not support absolute territorial exclusivity", he explained.

Breaking down barriers

The commission aims to reduce differences between national copyright rules before the end of the year, with Oettinger saying, "there needs to be a genuine future for the creative industry - we want to make it possible for careers to be pursued in the area of intellectual work and it must continue to have a genuine financial future".

According to Ansip, the college plans "to make all proposals during the next two years". He also stressed that "this strategy is not the finishing line - it is a starting point and I hope all EU institutions will agree on a clear timeline for taking this project forward".

Parliament's reaction

Unfortunately, given parliament's extremely mixed reaction to the DSM package, establishing a clear timeline any time soon seems unlikely.

Andreas Schwab, EPP group spokesman in parliament's internal market and consumer protection committee, praised the proposals for "heading in the right direction", but warned that "member states' laws will need further changes".

He added that the centre-right group "expects the commission to submit more concrete proposals to the parliament in due course".

S&D group vice-chair Kathleen Van Brempt accused the strategy of "lacking in both grand vision and on practical implementation", calling for "more details on how Europe can build a functioning digital society that provides opportunities and protection for all Europeans".

ECR deputy Vicky Ford - chair of parliament's internal market and consumer protection committee - also had a mixed reaction to the commission's plans.

She said, "the ambition in this strategy is good in some parts and needs some work in others", adding, "there is much more that entrepreneurs, businesses and consumers have suggested we could do to make trade easier and I would like to see many more suggestions from end users taken up in this area".

She highlighted that, "actions to increase portability and removing geographical barriers to accessing content must go hand in hand with measures to reduce illegal content and make sure creators and innovators are fairly paid, otherwise we will have little decent content at all".

ALDE group president Guy Verhofstadt said that "Ansip should be commended for his ambition, given that both his hands are tied behind his back by the council".

The Liberals have been campaigning for the end of mobile roaming charges across the EU, after plans to abolish them by the end of this year were scrapped a few months ago due to opposition from the council.

Verhofstadt said, "EU governments like to talk the talk, but in reality there is little evidence to suggest they want to create a DSM at all".

The Belgian MEP added that "all of the European political parties committed to ending roaming surcharges ahead of their European election campaign last year, and now it's time to deliver", accusing the council of having "shown complete disregard for the democratic process and the wishes of our electorate".

And least impressed of all with Ansip and Oettinger's proposals were the Greens, with the group's digital rights spokesperson Jan Albrecht calling them "a damp squib, with the commission proposing too little, too late to meet the challenges of the digital era".

The German MEP urged the commission to "do its homework while proactively working to ensure the

two important legislative proposals already in the pipeline on data protection and the telecoms market are brought to a conclusion".

Both of these proposals have been stuck in limbo after parliament and council were unable to reach an agreement, and while Ansip seemed hopeful a deal would be struck by the end of the year, Albrecht disagrees.

Meanwhile, Green digital economy spokesperson Michel Reimon called the DSM strategy "a failure".

From the Twittersphere

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— EP President (@EP_President) [May 6, 2015](#) [8]

[#DigitalSingleMarket](#) [5] is in everyone's mouth, and rightly so. Is it really the EU's top priority? What about roaming surcharges? [@EUCouncil](#) [9]

— Viviane Reding (@VivianeRedingEU) [May 6, 2015](#) [10]

EU Governments like to talk the talk, but in reality there is little evidence to suggest they really want to create a [#DigitalSingleMarket](#) [5]

— Guy Verhofstadt (@GuyVerhofstadt) [May 6, 2015](#) [11]

[#DigitalSingleMarket](#) [5]: we open consultations for affordable & high quality [#parceldelivery](#) [12] services across the EU

— Elżbieta Bienkowska (@EBienkowskaEU) [May 6, 2015](#) [13]

Totally agree with [@jyrkikatainen](#) [14] that when it comes to the [#DigitalSingleMarket](#) [5] the bigger picture is what matters! [pic.twitter.com/jS8dsKHnWM](#) [15]

— Eva Paunova (@evapaunova) [May 6, 2015](#) [16]

About the author

Julie Levy-Abegnoli is a journalist and editorial assistant for the Parliament Magazine

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