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Opening Speech:

"The challenge of e-Signatures for e-Procurement"

Conference on Cross-border use
of e-Signature in e-Procurement process

Brussels, 18 September 2008

Good morning ladies and gentlemen,

I am very pleased to deliver the opening speech at this conference on Cross-border use of e-Signatures in the e-Procurement process organised by Eurochambres.

I would like to thank **Eurochambres** for taking the initiative of organising an event on this strategic subject.

The topic of today's conference, "Cross-border use of e-Signatures in e-Procurement" could not be more appropriate, as I believe it expresses the **key challenge** in using electronic signatures for public procurement: the **cross-border dimension**.

The political importance of the cross-border dimension is clear. Any objective or project that aspires to move Europe can never succeed if it is done only in one single country. In case of electronic signatures, Europe will only move forward if the challenge of cross-border dimension is tackled.

Let me first recall the context of electronic public procurement in Europe and then elaborate more on the current **challenges of electronic signatures**.

During the Manchester Ministerial Conference back in 2005, the European Ministers agreed ambitious goals to move e-Procurement in Europe. They agreed that by 2010, public procurement would be fully available electronically. What is even more important, they also agreed that electronic procurement would be concretely used - at least in 50% of the cases!

This challenge was taken up one year later in the i2010 e-Government Action Plan.

In this Action Plan, both e-Procurement and e-Signatures are explicitly mentioned as key elements for boosting e-Government.

2010 is not that far off.

The question is: are we on track to reach these goals?

The legal framework is ready: the e-Signatures directive and the e-Procurement directives are in place for some time, now.

But is that enough? We need to go a step further after adopting the rules. This is very visible for example in implementing the Services Directive. It clearly requires interoperability of e-Signatures for the provision of a wide variety of electronic public services.

Another example is the recent Single Market Review which warns of the risk of creating new "e-barriers" in the absence of mutual recognition of e-Signatures for cross-border public services.

I am very glad that, at the same time, we have plenty of **examples of successful implementation of electronic procurement**:

- For instance, today tender notices are already regularly handled electronically all over Europe. At this level, we can say that the Manchester objectives have been met.

- France saves time for its service providers and civil servants by using electronic tendering with the platform "marchés-publics ".

- Denmark is a well-known example of expenditure reduction, saving 100 million euros a year by using electronic invoices.

We all agree that implementation of electronic public procurement has numerous advantages.

In order to fully benefit from them, the **electronic signature is an important enabler** for e-procurement.

As you know both electronic and hand-written signatures are legal instruments to identify the signer of a tender or an invoice. Obviously, tenders or invoices signed electronically cannot be changed without destroying the signature.

This is a key benefit, making e-Signatures a good solution for submitting electronic tenders, signing contracts and issuing invoices.

However, currently we have a number of different solutions for e-Procurement using disparate and non-interoperable electronic signatures. It is hard to move European electronic public procurement forward if it is moved in different directions at the same time.

We all understand that the issue of electronic signatures in public procurement is complex.

Bidders have to provide several electronic documents, from different sources, all of them properly signed. As if this was not enough, sometimes several electronic signatures have to be attached to a single document, for instance when a consortium submits a tender.

But let me be clear on this: the complexity of the issue cannot in any case justify reverting back to national solutions.

I regret to say that often public authorities in Member States do not consider the cross-border dimension in e-Procurement. They assume that bidders will use their own national electronic signature. This is not good enough.

I am glad that today the situation is progressively changing in the right direction, thanks to **several European activities**:

First of all, the Commission is launching an **action plan for e-Signatures**, as foreseen in the Single Market Review, details of which will be described later during this conference.

Secondly, the Commission is supporting several European countries working together on the **PEPPOL project** that has just been launched by the services of my colleague, Viviane Reding. What is new about this project is that it does not aim to create yet another e-Procurement platform. It rather aims to connect existing individual national solutions. I am glad that this project is a great example of joining forces beyond the European Union. Norway is indeed leading the PEPPOL consortium.
Another concrete example which is getting developed by the IDABC Unit, under my own responsibility, is the **e-Procurement demonstrators**. These demonstrators are practical examples aimed to help public authorities and software producers to develop e-Procurement systems in line with EU legislation. I am pleased to announce that a **helpdesk service** for the demonstrators has been launched today!

These are three examples that I trust will push forward the European interoperability of electronic procurement and electronic signatures.

Since the Commission is a public administration in its own right, we do not just intend to support external projects; we also want to align our own internal systems with them.

For example, we intend to align our internal e-Invoicing and e-Signatures projects with the commonly agreed European approach, so as to become fully interoperable with other European public administrations.

Finally, I'd like to stress that, in my view, e-Signatures today are essentially faced with a political challenge.

Indeed, e-Signatures are no longer a real technical problem.

The reason why we are still discussing the challenges of cross border dimension of electronic signatures is essentially due to lack of sufficiently strong political leadership and commitment.

The lack of mutual recognition between e-Signatures issued in different Member States is the main challenge today.

The Commission is ready and willing to help. The Commission can provide technical and political support. But the main challenge has to be taken up by each Member State.

Member States have to stand by the commitments of Manchester and Lisbon and show the political leadership to make it happen.

By doing so, we will move Europe.

We will deliver better value for public money to European citizens and we will increase the competitiveness of our internal market.

Together, we have pulled down the physical barriers at our borders.

Together, we can also pull down our existing electronic barriers.

Thank you all for being here, for what I'm sure will be a very successful and rewarding conference.