

Speech for UEAPME High Level Seminar on 26/01/2011

“The role of SMEs in Standardization”

1. INTRODUCTION: STANDARDISATION AND THE EU ECONOMY

Ladies and Gentleman,

It is an honour for me to close the ‘high-level seminar’ on “The role of SMEs in Standardization” on behalf of Vice President Tajani. I would like to thank you all for participating in today's seminar and for contributing your ideas on how to improve SME participation in standardisation. Let us consider for a moment the big picture:

Standards make a significant contribution to the EU economy. In 2009, existing standards accounted for at least 35 billion € of GDP growth within the EU. Such figures highlight the great potential of standardisation in creating new opportunities for businesses, including SMEs.

In an increasingly globalised world, standardisation can enhance the competitiveness of European enterprises. At the same time, standardisation enables such enterprises to access new markets, both within the EU and around the world.

2. STANDARDISATION AND SMES

For numerous European SMEs, standardisation is already a strategic asset, as seen in such areas as personal protective equipment and telecommunications, to name but two.

Their use of existing standards has helped European SMEs become market leaders, not only at the national, but also international, level. Moreover, by participating in work on standards development, these SMEs are able to anticipate future product development needs, thereby retaining their competitive advantage.

These success stories lead me to believe that standardisation will be pivotal in creating further opportunities for SMEs in the future. European standardisation must therefore be responsive to SMEs' needs – we must indeed 'think small first', as SMEs are key innovators in the EU economy.

3. BARRIERS TO SMES

At present, however, SMEs are not adequately represented in the standardisation process. Of greater concern is the fact that some standards have ignored the particular business circumstances and needs of SMEs in the past. Even though SMEs form the backbone of the European economy, it is the larger companies that gain from being well-represented in the technical bodies of standardisation.

Ladies and Gentleman, I will not list all of the reasons for SMEs' limited participation, although I would like to highlight one problem in particular.

In theory, the system is based on open and voluntary participation and a number of checks and balances exist to ensure that SMEs' interests are considered at the national level. In practice, however, technical committees at the European Standardisation level tend to be comprised of representatives from large enterprises, leaving little room for SMEs' involvement in National Standardisation bodies.

It is widely acknowledged that such barriers are a problem and that a policy action is required. In a recent public consultation carried out by the Commission on access to standardisation, around 70% of respondents affirmed that SME participation should be reinforced. This response confirms the conclusions of the independent Expert Panel for the Review of the European Standardisation System, set up by the Commission in 2009.

4. ACTIONS TO IMPROVE SMES' ACCESS

It is with these concerns in mind that I would now like to give a brief overview of our forthcoming plans for improving the access of SMEs, as well as the work we have carried out thus far. Vice President Tajani has placed a special emphasis on tackling and amending the obstacles faced by SMEs. A number of initiatives speak to this effort.

In April 2011, the Commission will publish a set of measures called the "**Standardisation Package**", based on our Review of the Standardisation System. This package will consist of a Strategic Communication and a proposal for a new Regulation on Standardisation.

SMEs will feature prominently in the package, with a number of actions taken to improve SME access to standardisation. These will build on work already undertaken in this area and address areas that include:

- Reviewing and lowering the cost of standards for SMEs;
- Ensuring that all levels of the European standardisation system are open, transparent and inclusive;
- Increasing SME participation in standardisation;
- Supporting organisations representing SMEs at European level.

I would also like to highlight another section of the package that is particularly relevant to SMEs; that is, the role of standardisation in fostering **innovation**.

Standards play a key role in supporting innovation. They can codify information about the state of the art of a particular technology. They can also facilitate the introduction of innovative products by providing interoperability between new and existing products, services and processes. In some instances, innovations can gain market acceptance more easily if they are certified to comply with existing standards for safety, quality and performance. Standards can therefore lower barriers to entry into markets.

This can be particularly helpful in assisting new players, which are often SMEs, in introducing innovative products into established markets. The standardisation package therefore contains a range of measures to ensure that standards are as timely and as high quality as possible.

However, it remains important to ensure that the current European Standardisation system is fit for the future, so that our Package can be implemented successfully. To this end, the Commission initiated a review in 2009, involving wide public consultation and evidence gathering. As part of this review, we have also taken into account the **European Parliament's** report on the Future of European Standardisation, which was adopted in October 2010. I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate Mr. Edvard Kožušník and Ms Lara Comi on this excellent report.

Moreover, this forthcoming Package builds upon the numerous initiatives we have carried out until present, which have granted a role for standardisation. Our recent and upcoming **Flagship initiatives** already envisage a prominent role for standardisation. These initiatives include:

- The Innovation Union,

- Our new Industrial Policy for Europe, and
- A Digital Agenda for Europe.

Additionally, standardisation will soon play an important role in supporting the **Europe 2020 Strategy** for promoting smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. Therefore, as well as enhancing the functioning of the internal market and the competitiveness of EU enterprises, standardisation will be used to tackle some of the biggest challenges we face as a society, such as climate change and an ageing population.

Other previous and ongoing efforts have also improved access to SMEs. For example, the European Commission established the **European Small Business Portal** with the goal of providing useful information to SMEs on a wide range of issues, which includes standardisation.

Moreover, in line with the **Small Business Act** for Europe, the Commission has provided support for fostering active involvement of SMEs in the European standardisation process.

To investigate SME needs in the area of standardisation, CEN and CENELEC carried out the **SME Access Project** in 2009. It concluded that 58 actions needed to be taken in three areas:

- 1) Increasing the benefits from standards,
- 2) Increasing involvement in standards and
- 3) Undertaking general actions to support both.

A **Working Group** has been established to implement these actions. Additionally, CEN-CENELEC has launched a new web portal to help SMEs work with standards and derive greater benefit from them.

In parallel with Working Group activities, the European Commission supports the "**External visibility and promotion project to assist small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) in Europe**", which begins in 2011. This is the second edition, whose main objectives are to build on the experience of the first phase carried out in 2008 and 2009.

The second edition will deliver a dynamic knowledge-based system, which will help share tools and experiences and will provide easily-accessible information for National Standards Bodies. The project also aims to set up and develop cooperation between National Standard Bodies and national SME associations.

5. CONCLUSION

To conclude, standardisation in Europe is based on partnership and consensus between all interested parties. That is its strength. Vice President Tajani would like to ensure that it is an equal partnership, in which all are able to participate and all can, and indeed *do*, benefit from the results. Over the coming decade, SMEs will become increasingly important partners in standardisation.

As you can see, much work remains to be accomplished in this time that is filled with challenges of its own. However, just as obstacles exist, so do opportunities, which give much hope for standardisation. Vice President Tajani and the Commission will seize these opportunities by working closely with our stakeholders, delivering a stronger European standardisation system. Indeed, it will be a system that is fit for 2020 and beyond. The support of other EU institutions and our stakeholders will be crucial in achieving these shared goals.