OPINION

European Economic and Social Committee

Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions –
European standards for the 21st century
[COM(2016) 358 final]

Rapporteur: Antonello PEZZINI
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1. **Conclusions and recommendations**

1.1 The EESC considers that a new vision is imperative in order to establish a European Standardisation System (ESS) able to adapt to constantly changing international circumstances and deliver increasing benefits to businesses, consumers, workers and the environment alike.

1.2 In its role as the "home of civil society", the EESC attaches particular importance to enhancing the transparency and inclusiveness of the ESS and calls for it to play a proactive role with regard to steering, applying and disseminating standards and supporting a culture of standardisation.

1.3 The EESC stresses the importance of strengthening the strategic role of technical standardisation to ensure:

- the quality, safety and performance of goods and services;
- an ever-higher level of consumer, worker and environmental protection; and
- higher levels of innovation to keep businesses competitive.

1.4 The EESC welcomes the launch of the Joint Initiative on Standardisation (JIS) bringing together public and private ESS partners to establish a common approach to setting priorities and developing joint initiatives to modernise and simplify the adoption of standards.

1.5 However, the EESC is greatly concerned about the limited guidelines for implementation and related funding, which are vital to turning a common innovative vision into tangible modernisation strategies and measures.

1.6 In this regard, the EESC recommends that the JIS public-private partnership\(^1\) be embedded structurally and financially within the framework of the Horizon 2020 Joint Technology Initiatives\(^2\), with the aim of:

- ensuring that well-defined technical and regulatory objectives are achieved within industry, services and consumption; and
- obtaining a greater and better concentration of financial and human resources and knowledge on shared priorities.

1.7 The EESC supports the Commission with regard to creating an integrated and structured system aimed at reaching a common strategy that helps to reduce the fragmentation of standards and of their planning systems.

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\(^1\) Joint Initiative on Standardisation.

\(^2\) See for example the metrology P2P.
1.8 The EESC therefore calls for an improved system of governance of standardisation strategies that takes account of the convergence of technologies and the digitisation of businesses and services as well as of the new and growing social and environmental competences, and which could operate in tandem with the current technical committee for standardisation.

1.9 European inter-institutional dialogue on standardisation should give a key role to all the representative bodies concerned. Standing groups should be set up within the EU institutions to provide guidance and assessment, first and foremost in the EESC and the Committee of the Regions (CoR), given that Article 114 of the TFEU stipulates that consultation is mandatory.

1.10 In the EESC’s view, there is a need to strengthen capacities in the ESS and in the relevant Commission directorates-general for making coordinated use of the relevant technical standardisation instrument for individual sectors, especially for service sectors.

1.11 The EESC considers it a priority to develop a fully-fledged European standardisation culture starting from basic education up to policy-makers and negotiators of international agreements, by launching and supporting a vigorous European awareness-raising campaign.

1.12 The EESC stresses that a truly innovative European standardisation policy should, primarily, seek customer satisfaction among individuals, businesses and workers and, by taking a balanced and flexible approach that reconciles standardisation and creativity, should achieve high levels of safety, quality and efficiency, as well as job creation and increased international competitiveness.

2. The technical standardisation system in the face of European and global challenges

2.1 The role of technical standardisation is of paramount importance for the operation of the single market and for the international competitiveness of products and services. It is a strategic tool that vouchsafes the quality, performance and safety of goods and services, the interoperability of networks and systems, high levels of business, worker, consumer and environmental protection, and higher levels of innovation and social inclusion.

2.2 In the light of new technological developments, political priorities and global trends, particularly in services, and the IT revolution, it is necessary to review the European Standardisation System (ESS) in order to preserve its many successful aspects, correct its shortcomings and strike the right balance between the European and national dimensions, and between freedom of innovation, creativity and technical and regulatory interoperability. It is also necessary – on a more general level – to respond to the new requirements and expectations of businesses, consumers, workers and European society as a whole.

2.3 In its role as the “home of civil society”, the EESC attaches particular importance to enhancing the transparency and inclusiveness of the ESS and calls for it to play an increasingly proactive

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3 See opinion TEN/593, not yet published in the OJ.
role with regard to steering, applying and disseminating standards and supporting a culture of standardisation, as the cornerstone for the success of future businesses and generations.

2.4 The EESC has always maintained that "a fast, efficient and inclusive European standardisation process represents not only a key pillar in the architecture of the single market, which is the fulcrum of European integration and the Europe 2020 strategy that seeks to achieve it, but also and above all one of the foundations of Europe's economic competitiveness and a driving force for innovation". Clear and transparent standards are therefore needed to protect consumers and businesses as well as the environment and society.

2.5 The main overall objectives of the ESS are to increase the contribution of standards and the process of European standardisation to the free movement of goods and services in the internal market, boost growth and innovation and promote the competitiveness of European firms, particularly SMEs, while at the same time ensuring high levels of consumer, worker and environmental protection. This should be done by means of broad but rapid, inclusive and transparent drafting processes both at national and European level, based on recognised criteria, such as those laid down in the WTO Agreement on Technical Barriers to Trade, and in Regulation (EU) No 1025/2012.

2.6 The EESC has recently emphasised that "European standardisation must serve increasingly – through the support of the social partners and stakeholders – to flesh out and enrich the processes under way in the global economies", stating that it would be desirable for "the European culture of standardisation to have a greater presence in and more influence on global standardisation processes" including through raising awareness of communication, ease of access and affordability.

2.6.1 It is also important to maintain the right balance between standardisation and creativity by ensuring that there is adequate scope for those concerned – including craft enterprises and small businesses – to express themselves freely and enrich products and services within the basic limits established by the standards.

2.7 European standardisation is set to play a key role: in establishing and operating a single market in products and services by gradually bringing about EU-level harmonisation of national standards, which often tend to create technical barriers to access to domestic markets and intra-European trade and commerce.

2.8 The convergence of technologies and the digitisation of society, businesses and public services means that the traditional distinction between general standardisation and digital standardisation is becoming blurred, as has been pointed out in another EESC opinion, and so the Commission needs to take a consistent approach to planning and setting standardisation priorities.

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6 See also opinion TEN/593, not yet published in the OJ.
7 See footnote 5.
2.9 In view of the wishes voiced by the various economic and social players in the EU regarding International Organization for Standardization (ISO)/International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC) standards, it is now becoming extremely important to shore up the ESS so as to ensure that international standards are aligned with a European system of standardisation that is rapid, efficient and inclusive of all interested parties, particularly when it comes to representing smaller firms, consumers and other stakeholders.

2.10 The EESC points out that upgrading the development of voluntary European standards on services could promote jobs and growth through increased cross-border services and greater market integration, making it possible to tap into the sector’s full potential for the European economy while duly safeguarding local working and living conditions, and helping to dismantle barriers arising from the use of national certification systems.

2.11 In response to fast evolving technological cycles, greater complexity and closer interaction in industrial systems, increasingly fluid boundaries between products, services and ICTs, the European Commission has launched a Joint Initiative on Standardisation (JIS), bringing together public and private ESS partners – as called for by the EESC – to define a shared, common vision and a common process focusing on a set of initiatives aimed at modernising, identifying priorities, speeding up and simplifying the adoption of standards by 2019, to be delivered through:

- awareness, education and understanding about the European Standardisation System;
- timely, high quality and aligned regulatory priorities and planning processes in the framework of R&I;
- coordination, cooperation, transparency and inclusiveness in representation, including smaller concerns;
- the active and transparent involvement of all stakeholders;
- competitiveness and the international dimension, by developing common standardisation models.

3. The European Commission’s proposals

3.1 The Commission’s communication sets out its vision accompanied by a standardisation package comprising a series of targets for modernising the European Standardisation System (ESS):

- **Joint Initiative on Standardisation (JIS):** an innovative partnership between European and national standardisation organisations, industry and professional associations, SMEs, consumer associations, trade unions, environmental organisations, the Member States, the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) and the European Commission, with the aim of taking practical actions to speed up and streamline the process of technical standardisation;

- **European technical and regulatory standards for services:** a guide to promote the development of voluntary European standards in the services sector, reduce barriers arising from national standards and certification schemes, and improve information to service providers;
Structured inter-institutional dialogue between the Commission, the European Parliament, the Council, the EESC and the CoR: an annual reporting and feedback system as part of the implementation of the EU's standardisation policy;

Presentation of annual work programmes: the 2017 work programme establishes the annual priorities of the ESS.

3.2 The Commission's plans, particularly in the services sector, are to:

- conduct studies in areas where there is conflict or duplication between national standards;
- agree on criteria for establishing priorities for European service standards;
- produce a targeted review gathering information on current national standards and procedures for authorising standards and certificates;
- ask CEN for an annual list of areas of potential conflict or duplication between national service standards or possible gaps in the development of standards;
- take account of the European dimension before developing national standards;
- recommend that Member States explore the use of European service standards.

3.2.1 The Commission is also proposing to promote available information on harmonised European standards by providing better access to the single digital gateway proposed in the single market strategy.

4. General comments

4.1 The EESC agrees – once again – that there is an urgent need to effectively and efficiently modernise the European Standardisation System, something that has been under discussion for more than five years. It considers a new common vision and practical actions, though still on a voluntary basis, as indispensable if we are to meet the global challenges of standardisation with an innovative process of cooperation, based on consensus on the timely development of standards in a fast changing technological climate.

4.2 According to the EESC, the standardisation process must begin from the research and development stage, by means of co-standardisation and pre-standardisation measures and by strengthening the mechanisms for transferring European standards to the international level, with the support of industry and SME representatives, consumers, the social partners, environmentalists and relevant civil society stakeholders.

4.3 If the steps to modernise the ESS set out in the joint JIS paper are to be effective and efficient both at home and internationally, the EESC maintains that priority should go to:

- aligning the programming, development and monitoring systems in the various European reference frameworks, and strengthening coordination between them;

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ensuring that there is a more robust multiannual framework with a budget for financing European standardisation bodies in order to follow up on the measures planned\(^9\),

- providing financial and organisational support for the inclusive participation of organisations and representative bodies that are weaker and less equipped through initiatives in the areas of developing technical and regulatory standards, "awareness, education and understanding", "European" inclusiveness and "the international dimension".

4.3.1 In this regard, the EESC recommends that a public-private partnership initiative be set up under the Horizon 2020 Joint Technology Initiatives (JTIs), building on the path mapped out in the JIS, with an appropriate budget and a structured system for establishing strategies and priorities.

4.4 The EESC is equally concerned by the absence of sturdy and innovative architecture for aligning priorities both among the different EU policies and the various directorates-general implementing them, and among programming instruments, other than the Standards Committee and JIS and structured dialogue initiatives, however laudable they may be.

4.4.1 In the EESC’s view, a new governance body is therefore needed to frame and monitor action strategies on standards spanning all aspects of standardisation, from scientific and technological to social and environmental, which could operate in tandem with the current technical committee for standardisation.

4.4.2 It believes that as it is now imperative, at long last, to modernise and promote the ESS, and given the nature of the March 2015 Council requests, we cannot act efficiently if we take a "business as usual" approach here. The European structured inter-institutional dialogue on standardisation should ensure a key proactive role for representative bodies, in particular the CoR and the EESC, given that Article 114 of the TFEU stipulates that the EESC must be consulted.

5. **Specific comments**

5.1 **Speed and timeliness of European technical standards.** There are diverging interests in terms of speed and difficulty in opting for a "one size fits all" solution to reduce the amount of time needed and shortcomings in monitoring processes. Timeliness is more important than speed if the latter were to undermine consensus building.

5.2 **Support for the competitiveness of European firms.** Overcoming obstacles to the participation of SMEs in the process of drafting/applying standards and reinforcing the links between standardisation, innovation and research projects, including through measures to build the capacity of small businesses.

5.3 **Support for the EU’s legislation and policies.** There is a growing demand for standards in support of the EU’s legislation and policies in order to obtain the requested standards: the capacities for coordination and communication between the various players and stakeholders need to be increased.

\(^9\) See Annex 1 to the JIS under the Single Market Strategy, 13.06.2016, Amsterdam.
5.4 **Improved capacity to anticipate.** When designing European standardisation processes, steps must be taken to boost the capacity to respond in good time to the need to anticipate standards, partly in order to lessen the danger of national standards undermining the overall efficiency of the ESS.

5.5 **Inclusiveness.** The representation capacity of civil society stakeholders and smaller organisations needs to be improved through capacity-building measures. The EESC has previously stressed the importance of "facilitating access to the standardisation process for SMEs and societal stakeholders ..." and "close monitoring of the efforts of the key standardisation players, in order to increase the inclusiveness of the ESS". The Annex III organisations should be granted specific member/partner status, with clear rights and obligations, especially the right to an opinion.

5.6 **Global support for European standards.** Greater impact, representation capacity, competence and coherence are needed, particularly in the ISO/IEC/ITU and especially for small businesses, consumers and the environment, and in multilateral frameworks and free trade agreements.

5.7 **Governance.** Steps must be taken to:

- redesign governance and coordination structures to make them more efficient;
- improve the Commission's interoperative communication networks on the standardisation process;
- harmonise working methods with transparent and inclusive public-private partnership planning structures and mechanisms for interactive dialogue.

5.8 **Multiannual financial support.** A multi-annual framework for funding is vital, both for pre-standardisation and co-standardisation research, Science & Society and Social Sciences & Humanities activities and creating an awareness and widespread culture of standardisation, and for supporting specific standardisation strategies and pilot schemes in leading sectors through the use of cofinancing in the general and regulatory framework of Horizon 2020.

5.9 **Systems and strategies for the future.** Need for impact analyses of future international standards on the European market and for forward sectoral and intersectoral studies. Need for regular assessments and follow-up of the effectiveness in practice of the measures taken, involving specially-formed structures in the institutions, such as a permanent study group on standardisation within the EESC and similar bodies in the CoR and European Parliament.

5.10 **Standardisation as an EU policy instrument.** For all European policies, capacities must be strengthened in the ESS and in the relevant Commission directorates-general for activating and making coordinated use of the relevant technical standardisation instrument for individual sectors.

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11 See the EMPIR metrology programme 2014-2020.
5.11 ***Structured inter-institutional dialogue.*** In the EESC’s view, this tool should be fully interactive and proactive, drawing on the activities of the standing groups set up within the European institutions and involving the CoR and the European Economic and Social Committee from the very start of the planning procedure, given that the TFEU\textsuperscript{12} stipulates that the single market, which includes standardisation, is included within the EESC’s remit.

Brussels, 20 October 2016

Georges DASSIS  
The president of the European Economic and Social Committee

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\textsuperscript{12} See in particular Article 114 of the TFEU.