

ETSI: Exceptionalism in Future European Standards



Walter Weigel, ETSI Director General, talks to InterComms about the ETSI position paper regarding the evolution of the European Standardisation System, that was presented to members of the European Parliament on June 22



Dr. Walter Weigel obtained a Master of Science in Electrical Engineering degree from the Technical University Munich in 1984 and in 1990 a Ph. D. in Electrical Engineering on pattern recognition. In September 2006 he was appointed Director General of ETSI (European Telecommunications Standards Institute), the world-wide leading ICT standards organisation. Prior to this, Dr. Weigel held several management positions at Siemens Germany, having joined the company in 1991.

Q: What has triggered this position paper?

A: For the past two years, the European Commission, largely working through the Directorate General for Enterprise, have been undertaking analysis about the future of European standardisation. In terms of ICT analysis, they have looked, for instance, at the interworking between standards and patents, including big industry success stories like GSM and UMTS, to use ETSI examples. They have also looked at the current policy for how to best support ICT standards. Moreover the Commission has invited experts in standardisation to join the so-called Express Group, where they discussed the future of European standardisation. The Commission's plan is to revise the whole policy environment for standardisation in Europe. To do so they need the European Parliament to agree, and my current understanding is that Parliament should vote on the proposals in mid-October.

The Parliament is taking its responsibility very seriously and has asked its Internal Market and Consumer Protection committee to look into the future standardisation issue. Naturally, this is the time when Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) are looking for opinions, arguments and facts. ETSI is one of the three European Standards

Organisations (ESO), together with CEN (European Committee for Normalisation) and CENELEC (European Committee for Electro-technical Standardisation), and as a stakeholder we have communicated the ETSI position paper.

Q: What are the issues as you see them?

A: The first issue is there is a risk for us at ETSI that we are often mixed in together with CEN and CENELEC. There are however fundamental differences between ETSI and CEN and CENELEC. CEN and CENELEC in this respect are alike, whereas we have some basic differences. One of the aims of ETSI's Paper was to make the MEPs aware that the three ESOs are not equal and their working methods are not based on the same principles. I'll outline the main differences: first of all, ETSI has direct member participation. We have 750 members with 80 percent coming from industry whereas CEN and CENELEC use the national delegation principle. CEN and CENELEC have representation from national standards organisations such as the British Standards Institute and the equivalent in other countries. Companies are members of these National Institutes, so they do have indirect membership in CEN and CENELEC. Second, while we are all not-for-profit organisations,

▶ ETSI has a different business model to fund and finance our activities. This is a fundamental difference. Besides subsidies from the Commission, CEN and CENELEC fund themselves basically through the sale of their standards. In our case however, it is the other way around. All of ETSI's over 25,000 standards are available for free over the Internet and we fund ourselves from the membership fees of the 750 members. The third issue is that CEN and CENELEC are very clearly focused on Europe only and they have a very clear relationship with their counterparts at an international level through the Dresden and Vienna Agreements. Here in ETSI, our 750 members come from 62 countries across the world. From this you can immediately see that we at ETSI have a global membership and a global impact.

Q: You've outlined the differences, what are your goals?

A: One of our goals was to make clear to the Members of Parliament that it is vital to consider the two different set-ups here in Europe. ETSI deals with ICT standards only and I believe that ICT standardisation needs to be different because we have very fast product cycles and very fast technology cycles. Compare, for example, the situation with power plants. A power plant is assumed to have a minimum life of 30-40 years whereas after six months the same model of mobile phone may no longer be available. ICT standardisation therefore has to be adopted to cope with the speed of these technology cycles. In another example, I think that it is fair to say there are maybe a dozen big industry players in the world producing locomotives. In ICT, especially as web technologies come into ICT, you have a multitude of start-ups from all over the world with excellent ideas who can implement software in the field almost immediately. It's not like hardware which may take years to be accepted. In ETSI we are convinced that our set-up with direct membership and with free deliverables over the internet is a kind of globalised approach which is better suited to the needs of ICT standardisation. We

believe the proof of that conviction is that we have been enormously successful with GSM, UMTS, DECT and TETRA - the last of these being the communication standard for first responders and used in over 100 countries in the world.

The second point we want to make to the European Parliament is that ICT is an enabling technology in vertical businesses. Medical equipment, power grid equipment or industry automation products are not ICT products but we see that modern ICT technologies are key enablers to these vertical businesses. Another example is intelligent transport systems – over a hundred microprocessors are used in a car, for example. What I am saying is that you need to have excellent Information and Communication Technologies and you have to have excellent standards for these enabling ICT technologies in order to ensure a competitive product or service in your vertical business. So we see a merger of ICT technologies moving into other business sectors.

This leads us into a few problems. The three actors – ETSI, CEN and CENELEC - were originally founded according to the classic segmentation of electro-technical standards, non electro-technical standards and telecommunication standards. What you now see is that industry automation is coming together with ICT, power equipment is coming together with ICT and health products are coming together with ICT. Consequently you have sector-specific standardisation coming from CEN and CENELEC, but with standardisation also coming from the ICT sector - which is ETSI.

This creates difficulties because the ESOs have never dealt with large-scale cross-sector standardisation together, and it demands increased co-operation. However, because of our different business modes, this is not so easy. For example, ETSI will provide the standards for free over the internet while CEN and CENELEC want to sell the standards. That is not anyone's fault but it does lead to a conflict of interest that we have to solve.

Q: How would the proposals change how Europe deals with those standards developed beyond its borders?

A: In the ICT sector we have a very different history of standardisation itself. ETSI has certainly had its successes. We also have to admit that there are other standardisation bodies like the Internet Engineering Task Force that are doing almost all the IP standards while the IEEE's big success story is WiFi. We have to find a way to cope with standards coming from non-European bodies. The Commission and the European Parliament have to make up their mind on how to do this. I still think that the right way is not to give those external standards a European standardisation 'blessing'. This is not because we want to keep some kind of monopoly but because ICT standards typically include many patents and this is a highly legal issue. If the Commission gives equal status to a non-European legal entity, for example based in the US, what happens if something goes wrong with the patents or the standards? ETSI is legally based in Europe and DG Competition has a grip on us. Every court in Europe can call on us but what do you do with a standards organisation outside Europe? The proposal is – and we agree on this – that it does not make sense for e.g. the Wireless LAN standard to be redeveloped in Europe just for political reasons, so the idea is that the standard, as a deliverable, gets a kind of European blessing when it has been formally recognised as meeting various criteria, including openness and transparency. The question is, who should do this? Our proposal is to replicate the case of IEEE and WiFi where ETSI has done this. As a result we have published the wireless LAN standards as ETSI standards called HiperLAN and we are convinced that this is a proven way to resolve this challenge.

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