

Open Letter to the European Commission

Europe's Digital Single Market must be multilingual!

We welcome the plans of the European Commission to establish a Digital Single Market (DSM) in Europe. Many borders and obstacles have already been removed or are addressed in the current DSM objectives. Still, language barriers remain a major obstacle to a truly unified European economy and society.

Linguistic diversity is and must remain a cornerstone and treasured cultural asset of Europe. However, the language barriers created by our 24 official EU languages cause the European market to be fragmented and to fall short of its economic potential. Almost half of European citizens never shop online in languages other than their native tongue, access to public e-services is usually restricted to national languages, and the richness of EU educational and cultural content is confined within linguistic communities. European SMEs are at particular disadvantage, because the cost of providing services in multiple languages is prohibitive and has a negative impact on their competitiveness.

Fortunately, in order to overcome these barriers, Europe does not need to abandon its treasure of language diversity. Technological development has brought us solutions to automate translations and other multilingual processes. Although not perfect, these technologies already bring immense benefits enabling multilingual and cross-lingual access to websites and e-services, extracting knowledge out of multilingual data, and boosting efficiency of translators.

Yet online machine translation and language technology services are dominated by global non-European companies which primarily focus on English and a few of the world's largest languages neglecting EU languages with less economic power. As a result almost half of Europe's citizens are digitally disadvantaged due to their mother tongue.

The market alone fails to address the European language challenge which calls for an immediate and concerted EU action. Europe needs a strategy to remove language barriers, enabling EU businesses and people, and providing equal digital opportunities for all EU language communities.

Only if the DSM strategy foresees the use of technological solutions for bridging language barriers can the full potential of the Digital Single Market be unleashed. These solutions should include, among others, a set of digital services for all EU official languages available to all European citizens, businesses and organisations. These key enabling digital language services will allow technology and service companies to create numerous commercial solutions to cover a variety of market needs and requirements

We believe that such technology solutions, based on excellent European industry innovations and research results, will provide all European citizens, businesses and public institutions access to high-quality machine translation and additional sophisticated language solutions for businesses, consumers and cross-border public services. The community of European industry and researchers is currently developing a Strategic Agenda for the multilingual Digital Single Market. This strategy paper will be presented at the Riga Summit 2015 (April 27–29, 2015).

We are convinced that the EC's strategy for the Digital Single Market must recognise multilingualism not only as a challenge but also as an immense opportunity for economic growth and social cohesion.

We, the undersigned stakeholders—researchers, developers, SMEs, market leaders and opinion makers, and individuals—ask the European Commission to address the multilingual challenge in the DSM strategy and pledge to work together to provide a solution for overcoming language barriers, thereby making a truly integrated Digital Single Market a reality.

As of April 19, 2015, over 3400 individuals and organisations have signed this letter.

Visit <http://multilingualeurope.eu> to read the letter in 20+ languages and add your name to it!