Reaping the full benefits of the digital dividend in Europe: a common approach to the use of the spectrum released by the digital switchover

2008/2099(INI) - 24/09/2008 - Text adopted by Parliament, single reading

The European Parliament adopted by 551 votes to 24, with 38 abstentions, a resolution following the Commission Communication entitled ‘reaping the full benefits of the digital dividend in Europe: A common approach to the use of the spectrum released by the digital switchover’.

The own initiative report had been tabled for consideration in plenary by Patrizia **TOIA** (ALDE, IT) on behalf of the Committee on Industry, Research and Energy.

The resolution recalls the need for digital switchover which, together with the development of new information and communication technologies and the digital dividend, will help to bridge the digital divide and contribute to the achievement of the Lisbon goals. It stresses that the immediacy of switchover in some Member States and the differences in national switchover plans require a response at Community level that can not wait until the reform directives enter into force (from the ‘telecom’ package).

A common and balanced approach: the Parliament urges the Member States to release their digital dividends as quickly as possible, allowing citizens of the Union to benefit from the deployment of new, innovative and competitive services. While acknowledging the right of Member States to determine their use of the digital dividend, MEPs affirm that a coordinated approach at Community level would greatly enhance the value of the dividend and be the most efficient way to avoid harmful interference between Member States and between Member States and third countries. Member States are called upon to develop, following a common methodology, national digital dividend strategies by the end of 2009.

Auctions: MEPs consider that, where auctions are used to allocate frequencies, Member States should adopt a common approach as regards the conditions and methods of auction and the allocation of the generated resources. The Commission is urged to present guidelines along these lines. In any event, the digital dividend should be allocated on a technology-neutral basis.

Guiding principles in the allocation of the digital dividend: the resolution underlines that the main guiding principle in the allocation of the digital dividend should be to serve the general interest by ensuring the best social, cultural and economic value in terms of an enhanced and geographically wider offer of services, while also protecting the rights of current users of audiovisual media services and reflecting cultural and linguistic diversity. In this context, MEPs consider that decisions on digital dividend management should promote and protect general interest objectives linked to audiovisual and media policies such as freedom of expression, media pluralism, cultural and linguistic diversity and the rights of minors.

Services available to citizens: the resolution also underlines the contribution that the digital dividend can make to the provision of enhanced interoperable social services to citizens (such as e-government, e-health, e-vocational training and e-education), in particular those living in less favoured or isolated areas, such as rural and less-developed areas and islands. Member States should step up measures to enable disabled and elderly users and users with special social needs to make the most of the benefits provided by the digital dividend.

Unlicensed users: Member States are called upon to recognise the social, cultural and economic value of allowing unlicensed users access to the dividend, in particular small and medium-sized enterprises and the not-for-profit sector. This would increase the efficiency of spectrum use by concentrating such unlicensed uses in the currently unused frequencies (white spaces).

More effective use of the spectrum: in order to facilitate the emergence of innovative and successful national, cross-border and pan-European services, the resolution encourages the Member States to work together and with the Commission to identify common spectrum sub-bands of the digital dividend for different application clusters that could be harmonised on a technology-neutral basis. In this context, MEPs support a coordinated approach at Community level, based on different clusters of the UHF spectrum for uni-directional and bi-directional services, taking into account the potential for harmful interference.

Better cooperation: the Commission is called upon to undertake, in cooperation with the Member States, the appropriate technical, socio-economic and cost-benefit studies to determine the size and characteristics of the sub-bands that could be coordinated or harmonised at Community level. On the basis of these studies, the Commission should submit a proposal to the European Parliament and the Council for better coordination measures at Community level on the use of the digital dividend, in accordance with internationally agreed frequency plans.

The Parliament also adopted an amendment in plenary calling on the Member States to reallocate part of the digital dividend used in the past for military purposes to new civilian applications.