Digital Single Market conference on the free movement of data

Closing speech by Vice-President Andrus Ansip in charge of the Digital Single Market

Ministers, ladies and gentlemen,

We have heard a lot today about the importance of data and of getting it to flow without restraints.

Different situations in the public and private sectors, bottlenecks holding up data flows. Some expectations and possible ways forward.

While we do not yet have all the answers, I would like to thank everyone for today's valuable and varied contributions.

One thing I do know is that today's situation regarding data in Europe has to change. We plan to make that happen as part of the plan to build a Digital Single Market.

And as soon as possible. For a start, we urgently need to address data localisation rules. But this is not the only issue.

There are many other aspects of data to be looked into – for example, how we can further free up publicly funded data.

Or how we improve data analytics capacity in Europe.

It is also important how we look at legal clarity concerning autonomous systems, so as to strike a balance between the needs of users and the responsibility of operators and manufacturers.

This is about making the best value of data and facilitating imaginative new uses of data. It is about access to data, for more data to be available to more people.

The real value of data will only come out if it can be used to the full. That will lead to more development of the data economy, bringing more growth and jobs.

Take the huge potential in geographical and weather information, traffic data, general statistics, data from publicly funded research projects, and certain books from libraries.

All this data can be re-used in new products and services, in both the public and private sectors. It can stimulate new markets, businesses and jobs by adding innovation value to the data that was gathered in the first place.

For example, Scania now has a quarter of a million connected vehicles around the world. They make a vast amount of valuable information available in real time to the truck owners.

Of course, most of this is commercial data.

But there is a lot of other useful data that is collected: weather, road and traffic conditions. This data has a lot of potential for re-use and does not necessarily have any direct commercial value for the truck owners or for Scania.

Our task now is to incentivise private companies to make these types of general interest data available for public administrations or even startups to use.

Imaginative re-use of data is something we should encourage and facilitate more widely, within and between other sectors. But that will not happen if data cannot flow freely and smoothly, nationally and internationally.

Data is not only the basis of our digital future and prosperity.

It is a valuable resource in itself.

Keeping that resource unnecessarily stuck in national data centres or in a certain geographic area means that it cannot be used to its full potential.

It means that data cannot be easily traded, exchanged or re-used in new imaginative ways.

This is holding up the Digital Single Market.

It is holding up small and medium enterprises and startups from scaling up and expanding.

It is holding up our progress in fast-growth sectors like the Internet of Things and cloud computing services.

I would call this is a waste. And an expensive waste as well.

The core of the problem remains the same: national requirements on processing, storage and transfer of data.

You could also call them data protectionism, or data nationalism.

Digital borders, or a non-tariff barrier to trade.

But whatever their name, rules forcing data to be stored unnecessarily within national territory do not make sense in the Digital Single Market. There is no place for them.

Ladies and gentlemen: I know that you are familiar with much of the situation that I have just described.

Let me now explain what the European Commission is planning to do about it.

We have taken time to learn more about the scale of the problem and how best to move forward together with EU countries and all parties concerned. This approach has paid off.

We have identified two wider dimensions to address.

The first is a lack of legal certainty about applicable rules and practices when it comes to data movement, outside the situations covered by the General Data Protection Regulation.

The result? Data localisation becomes the default option. We want to avoid this.

The second is a lack of trust in cross-border storage and processing of data.

Unfortunately, the result is the same. Data localisation again becomes the preferred option, for both public and private sectors.

One way forward would be to establish free movement of data as a basic principle in EU law.

We are also working on other principles in this package such as the principle of availability of data, even when it is stored in other EU countries, when public authorities need it.

This could be for taxation or business register purposes, for example.

And we are looking into improving the situation for switching cloud service providers. The main idea is that the user should be able to transfer data fast and without re-entering it manually.

Commission experts are now working on an impact assessment, which is a necessary step before making any legal proposal. On that basis, we would prepare such a proposal, with the aim of presenting it this autumn.

As we know, it is often not easy to draw the line between where personal data ends and non-personal data begins. That is why our starting point is the EU's recent General Data Protection Regulation.

The more general debates on data are continuing. We know there are concerns about using data generated in an industrial context and about legal clarity concerning autonomous systems.

As I said at the start: we do not yet have all the answers and our work continues.

But, if we can get rid of needless national and local barriers to data flows, as well as address the underlying uncertainties, then everyone stands to gain: companies, governments and consumers.

In the end, people, businesses and public administrations must be able to go digital with confidence.

Sorting out today's situation would send a clear political message that Europe is open for business.

That will be essential as we build a cross-border and data-focused economy.

Let's make sure that we do not miss the boat. Thank you."