

## OFE OPINION

Governments around the world are moving towards open standards and open source technologies but Europe appears stuck in the slow lane. Why the European Commission should consider an open alternative as it moves to a new generation of PC operating systems

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Governments around the world are at last breaking free from software lock-in. Software built on open standards – including open source - are no longer the preserve of computer geeks. Thanks to the Internet they have become almost ubiquitous. In fact they are now so mainstream that governments in some of the largest countries in the world are switching to them in preference to the closed specifications they relied on in the past. Open technologies have proven themselves to be every bit as secure as closed ones.

Sadly Europe, arguably the birthplace of open source software and the open standards-based world wide web, is in danger of rapidly become a laggard in this march towards open and fully interoperable computer systems. While some national and regional governments from around Europe have made impressive moves in the right direction the European Commission – the executive body of the European Union - remains wedded to a single closed operating system and shows no signs of even considering an open alternative.

According to a report in the [New York Times](#) last week senior Commission civil servants met in December last year and agreed in principle to migrate over 36,000 PC s operated by officials in the Commission and in other E.U. institutions to Windows 7 from the Windows XP and Windows 2000 operating systems they use now, without holding a public tender.

Two days after the meeting the Commission published its long-awaited [European Interoperability Framework](#), a set of guidelines designed to help national governments install IT systems that interoperate with each other and with Europe's citizens. The EIF promotes the use of open specifications (another word for standards), and warns of the perils of being locked into one or another software vendor. The agreement in principle to migrate to Windows 7 shows that the Commission is itself a victim of the sort of lock-in it warns other public administrations against. The migration to Windows 7 will ensure that this lock-in will extend into the foreseeable future.

Eighteen months ago at an Openforum Europe (OFE) event the then Competition Commissioner (now Commission Vice President) Neelie Kroes said that with regard to software procurement “we must practice what we promote”. She understands the dangers of software lock-in, having battled against Microsoft for the duration of her time as Europe's antitrust chief.

Now responsible for the Digital Agenda Vice President Kroes has been forthright in building her strategy based on openness. Unfortunately, the message doesn't appear to have resonated with her colleagues responsible for software procurement on behalf of the EU institutions.

The New York Times article appeared on the same day the Commission [announced](#) a review of the

rules governing public procurement by national and regional government bodies. The accompanying public consultation asks whether the Commission should put in place tougher measures to ensure transparency in the procurement process. Judging by the handling of the Commission's own software procurement decisions the answer would have to be a resounding yes.

Contrast what the Commission is doing with what is happening elsewhere in the world. Earlier this month Russian prime minister Vladimir Putin [said](#) that all Russian government computers would be running on Linux by 2015. A few days earlier Vivek Kundra, Barak Obama's chief information officer circulated a [memo](#) to all US government agencies reminding them that they must consider all types of software vendors including open source. The memo appeared two days after a Federal Court in Washington, DC [ordered](#) the Interior Ministry to scrap a tender for email services that was deemed to favour Microsoft. The legal action was sparked by Google, which wants to compete for the business with its open standards-based email software.

Last November, while European Commission officials were agonizing over the final wording of the EIF, and how to balance the interests of supporters of open standards and those opposed to openness, India [published](#) its own government interoperability framework which unapologetically favours open standards, which it defines as being based on royalty free licensing.

Closer to home, many regional public authorities across Europe have broken free of software lock-in, the most famous being the City of Munich, which started the switch from Windows to SuSE Linux in 2003. Progress has been made at national level too in the UK, Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands, Portugal and [France](#), where in 2005 the Gendarmerie Nationale (national police force) began to purge all its computers of Windows, replacing it with the open source Ubuntu operating system. The migration is due to be completed by 2015.

The Commission decision in principle to migrate to Windows 7 without an open procurement flies in the face of the Digital Agenda and undermines the EU executive's authority and its impressive work both in matters concerning public procurement and in its IT policy.

There are already strict European rules on public procurement. At a time when OFE's own monitoring suggests some 25% of European public sector software tenders may break current rules, the Commission should be setting best practice, which it clearly is not.

The most sensible course of action would be for the Commission to abandon the Windows 7 migration and seek a short extension to the existing licenses for XP and W2000, which are due to expire shortly. It should then organize a fully transparent call for tenders for the contract. In other words, it should conduct this important software procurement in the way it expects public authorities around Europe to act.

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