A European Single Point of Contact

Research Study
Committee on Internal Market and Consumer Protection

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Objective

- Provision of background information and advice on **priority measures and actions** in the field of a European Single Point of Contact (SPC)
  - Single Points of Contact within the context of this study include:
    - Online portals and websites that enable citizens and businesses to **access benefits, exercise rights** and **minimise obstacles** within the Single Market
    - Includes **all activities**: living, working, studying
    - Encompasses **all interactions**: citizen and administration, business and administration, consumers and business.
  - The definition therefore includes, but is **broader** than, the definition in the **Services Directive** of "Points of Single Contact".

Approach (1)

1. **Assess current state of play**
   - At European level; and,
   - Within 10 Member States
     - France, Portugal, Sweden, Italy, Hungary, United Kingdom, Bulgaria, Slovenia, Germany and the Netherlands
     - Selection of Member States based on geography, size, year of entry to EU, and extent of cross-border purchases*

2. **Investigate citizen and business (SME) knowledge and understanding of European level SPCs**
   - Telephone interviews with 500 citizens and 250 SMEs (total)
   - United Kingdom, Hungary, Italy, Bulgaria and Portugal (selection based on previous criteria)

3. **Evaluate effectiveness, accessibility, efficiency and comprehensiveness of European level SPCs**
   - Drawing from existing evaluations and the surveys

* Eurobarometer 2012

Approach (2)

- Drawing upon findings from previous 3 steps
  - Provide **recommendations** on available solutions **to improve access to information** and **execution of rights**
    - Giving consideration to the **Regulation on Online Dispute Resolution Platform**, and recommendations on integration and scope (European Parliament, 2012)

  - Analyse the option of a **common online platform** that is a **single entry point** for citizens, consumers and business
    - Consider the **Form** and **scope** of a common online platform

  - Assess the **value added** of a common online platform

1. State of play

- **44 European level online services identified**
  - 48% of these target citizens and consumers;
  - 34% target businesses; and,
  - 18% provide services across these three user groups.

- **Complementarities and overlaps in scope between existing European level online points of contact**
  - legal and justice services for citizens, consumer and business (SOLVIT, FIN-NET, ECC-NET, Your Europe Advice, the European e-justice portal and E-CODEX)
  - Advice on living, working and studying in the EU (Europe.eu, Your Europe, EURES)
  - Large number of online services targeted at citizens in the area of education, employment and culture

  - **Clear inter linkages guiding users between complimentary services is limited**

1. State of play

- At national level there is a large number of online services
  - From 61 in Bulgaria to 22 in the Netherlands

- National level organisation of online services varies
  - Some countries are **advanced in provision of e-government services**, with access to services through a **single entry point** (e.g. UK and 'GOV.UK', Bulgaria and 'egov.bg', Hungary and 'Governments Window')
  - Others have a more **disaggregated approach** with entry points at **regional** and **municipality** level (e.g. Italy and Germany)

1. State of play: Conclusions

- The **large number of SPCs at European level** combined with and even **greater number of SPCs at national level** creates **complexity** for users in terms of awareness, identification and access to relevant services.

- No **clear sign-posting** and **no transparent explanation** of complementarities (and differences) creates difficulties in **differentiating and understanding scope**.

2. Knowledge and understanding

- **Awareness of existing services is low** (spontaneous question)
  - 91.6% of citizens and business did not know of any online services at European level they could turn to if they had a problem.
  - Less than 1.5% of citizens and 1% of businesses spontaneously knew of any online services
  - The most common response was a 'national level institution' (2.8% of consumers and 4.8% of businesses)
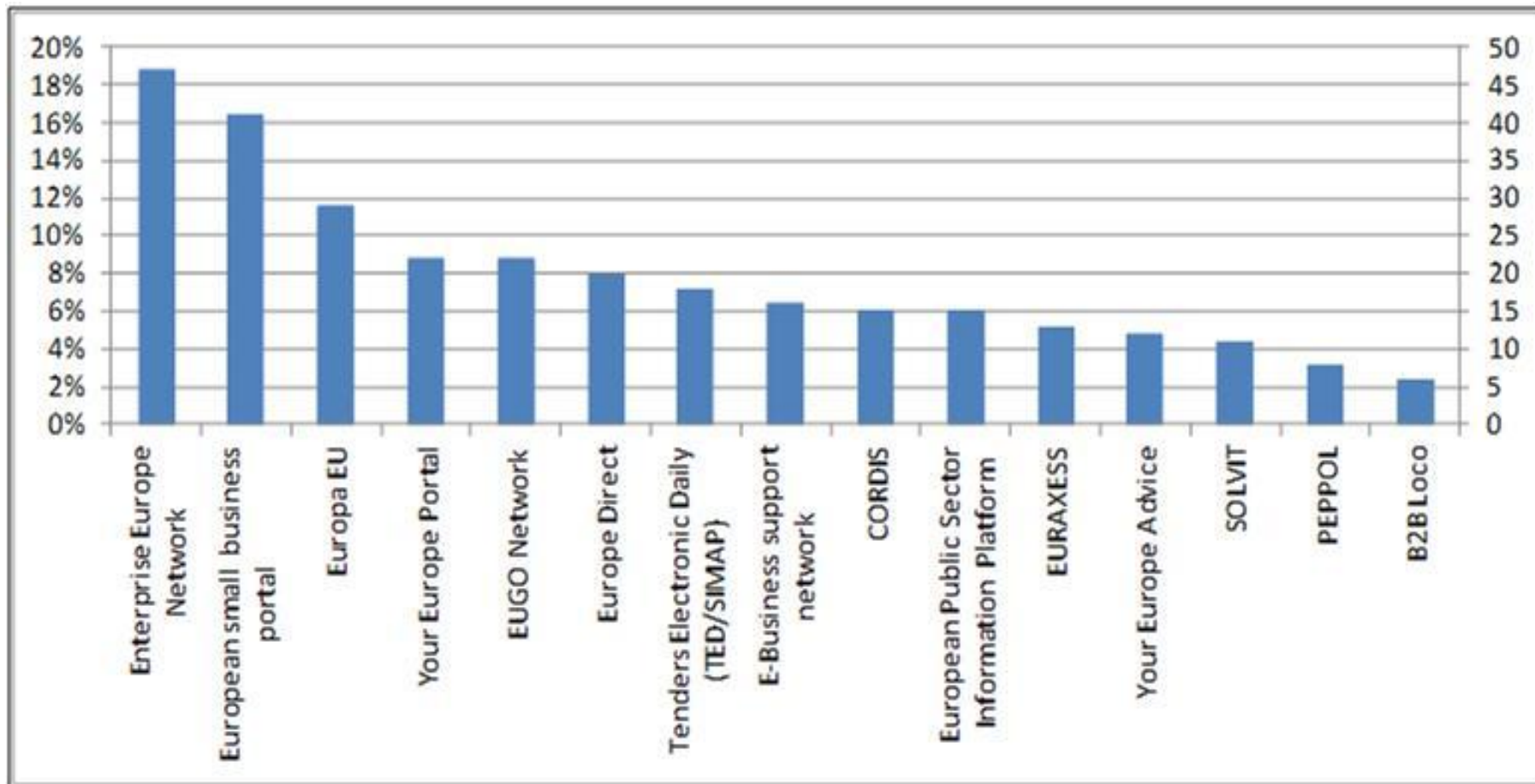 - Second most common an 'internet search' (1.4% of citizens)

2. Knowledge and understanding

Citizen awareness of specific services is low even after **specific prompting**
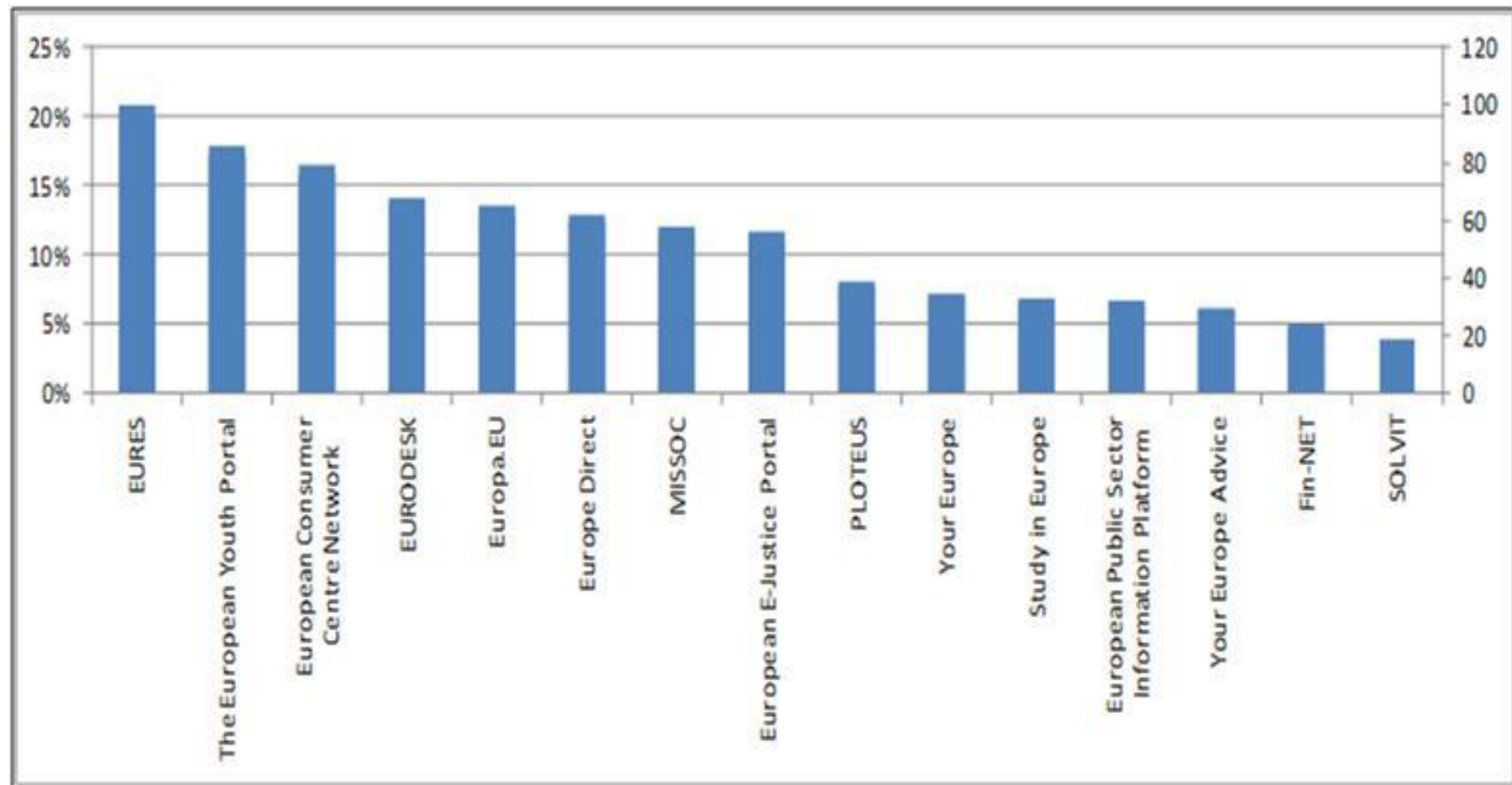
2. Knowledge and understanding

Business awareness of specific services is low even after **specific prompting**

2. Knowledge and understanding: Scope

- **Understanding of scope is mixed, yet is low**
    - **40% of citizens** that were aware of an online service did **not know what the target audience was.**
        - However, 21% correctly knew SOLVIT targets both citizens and consumers
        - 34% knew ECC-NET focuses on consumer issues.
        - 30% correctly knew the 'Your Europe' family targets both groups.
    - **27% of business** who were aware of SOLVIT believed that **SOLVIT targets only citizens**. 55% did not know and 9% correctly identified both citizens and businesses.
        - 32% correctly knew EUGO/SPC focuses on business issues, 36% did not know.
        - 25%- 36% correctly knew 'Your Europe' family targets both groups, 33% -50% did not know.

2. Knowledge and understanding: Functions and competencies

- **Understanding of Functions is mixed, yet is low**
  - **42% - 75% of citizens** who knew of an online service reported they <u>did not know</u> what key functions it performed.
    - 75% did not know the functions of FIN-NET, and no respondent knew that FIN-NET provided ADR.
    - No respondent knew SOLVIT dealt with violations of EU law.

  - For the majority of services, **50% of businesses** who knew of an online service reported they <u>did not know</u> what key functions it performed.
    - 18% of businesses correctly knew of SOLVIT deals with violations of EU law.
    - 14% knew that EUGO/SPC provides for completion of administrative procedures.

3. Evaluation of Single Points of Contact

- **Awareness is consistently low across all user groups**
  - Potential users do not generally think of turning to a European level online services for information, advice and assistance.
- Of users, **satisfaction is medium to high overall**
  - **Dissatisfaction** arises due to **limited staff skills** and **variability and accuracy of information.**
- The overall framework is **comprehensive** covering a wide range of issues**.**
  - **Language coverage is variable** (23% provide information on all official EU languages)
    - Particular problem when landing page or information sheets only available in limited number of languages (e.g. FIN-NET)

3. Evaluation of Single Points of Contact

- The overall framework covers a wide range of issues, yet it presents a **myriad of different entry points.**

- Users may need to **visit multiple sites** for one issue.

- Awareness is low and understanding poor, leading to **uncertainty for users** about which services are best for their need, how to access the services and the differences and complementarities between services.

Solutions for improvement to access and execution of rights

- A **single entry point** at European level providing guidance through the current complex framework of European and national level online services.

- More effective **sign-posting** between existing services.

- **Streamlining and grouping services** that have complimentary remits.

- Use of **FAQ** based around user key issues and **intelligent search.**

- Online **enquiry forms** and **easy to understand terminology.**

- **Search engine optimisation.**

- **Improved cooperation** between European level services and national services, including hosting European level 'logo/links' on complimentary national organisation sites.

- Minimisation of **language gaps** and use of Statistical Machine Translation technology.

Characteristics, functions and scope of a common platform

- **Single entry point** that guides and streams users to the most appropriate service based on their needs.

- **Group existing services into 'families'** based on complimentary remits.

- **Interlink** complimentary services, and **route users** between services.

- **Utilise the key solutions** (FAQ, online enquiry forms, language translation, search engine optimisation, cooperation with national organisations).

- Each individual service within the common platform should provide **information about national level issues** within its remit and **access to relevant national organisations.**

Value added of a common platform

- Objective of a common platform and benefits it can provide are:
    - Reduce **complexity** of the online services framework.
    - Improve **awareness** and **understanding** of online services available.
    - Improve **effectiveness** and **efficiency** in accessing information, advice and assistance through the online services.
    - Contribute to the benefits of improved **web-accessibility**.

Reduce complexity

- Large number of online services at European level and extensive range at national level with different organisational arrangements lead to **complexity in identification and access**.
- The framework is a **myriad of different entry points**.
- **Latent demand** for e-government services is estimated to be over 1.5 million citizens and more than 300,000 businesses per year (European Commission 2011).
  - Barriers to increased demand include complexity and low levels of awareness.
- The common platform should act as a single entry for users that **streams** or **guides** users to the **relevant services** given their requirements.

Improve awareness and understanding

- Awareness of online services is low and there is uncertainty and misunderstanding of their key functions and competencies.
  - A common platform can help to improve **consumer confidence** by improving awareness and understanding of individual services (e.g. ECC-NET, FIN-NET).
    - Benefits from increased consumer confidence in cross-border e-commerce is estimated at 0.2% of EU GDP or €2.5 billion (European Commission, 2011).
  - **63% of European citizens would welcome an online service** that would help them to identify which online service to turn to (European Commission, 2012).

Improve effectiveness and efficiency

- The framework of services is **disjointed,** there is **overlap** between similar services and **interlinking** to guide users is **limited**.

- Automatic guiding to information, advice and assistance for users; and, clear, transparent and up-to-date information can:
  - Improve **consumer trust** and **empowerment** in transactions.
    - Trust is the lowest market performance indicator in the Consumer Market Scoreboard. Trust is highly correlated with overall market performance.
  - Help **vulnerable consumers** and those with functional disabilities
    - Key action of the 2013 EU Citizenship report.
  - Minimise **business compliance costs** when setting-up or exporting to other countries
    - Estimates from previous studies compliance costs are up to 8% of turnover in Member States businesses export to.

Benefits of improved web-accessibility

- A common online platform can contribute to the benefits of improved online access across Europe.
  - The Impact Assessment on accessibility of public sector websites COM(2012) estimates that:
    - Value of time lost by EU citizens if they cannot access public services online ranges between **€150 million and €600 million**.
    - Economic impact for citizens of improved web-accessibility is in the range of **€300 million per year in savings** by being able to compare services in the Internal Market.
  - Estimated benefits from improved cross-border digital services in the areas of moving, health, employment and business residence are estimated to be **€180 million per year** (European Commission, 2011).

Conclusion

- Overall, a common platform that provides **an efficient and effective single point of entry to European and national level online services**; and, which improves users' awareness, understanding and access to online services, would raise the number of users of these services. Greater use of services will help users to exercise their rights and, in turn, this can help to **improve citizens' and businesses' perceptions and understanding of the value of the Internal Market rules and EU actions**.