

Internet Governance, last call for Europe

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This could be a critical year for the governance of the Internet. A plan for transferring the US stewardship of the IANA functions to the global community is expected to come to life by next September. Post-WCIT tensions over the role of countries in managing the web may come to a showdown at the WSIS+10 high-level conference to be held next December in New York.

And while the UN General Assembly is likely to extend the mandate of the IGF, an essential platform for policy dialogue, many other Internet Governance issues such as privacy, cybersecurity and net neutrality will be debated more than ever in countless international venues. If it wants to carry some weight with the Internet "big game", Europe cannot afford to play with 28 different national teams. It should speak with one voice out of a clear and bold vision.

Unfortunately, there are few signs that this will occur. In the past years Member states have relegated the issue of Internet Governance to a bunch of working documents and non-binding declarations. They haven't gone beyond agreeing on a set of vague principles and have widely disregarded the European Commission's pleas for more common action.

Such disengagement conceals the will to keep a free hand on the issue, highlighting different national stances. For instance, France and Germany are seemingly inclined to favour a more intergovernmental approach in the future governance of the Internet, whereas other EU countries are far more cautious fearing this could give more (legal) legitimacy to non liberal states' attempts at censoring the web.

Nonetheless, a reasonable compromise would not be that difficult. Last year, the European Commission presented an ambitious political document on Internet Governance that could serve as a basis for further negotiations. Likewise, the European Parliament outlined his position in a number of non-binding resolutions.

Europe has still a great chance to be a protagonist of the current transition if it is willing to set aside ineffective national interests and develop a long-term and common strategy. But it should hurry.