

INTERVIEW WITH AARTI HOLLA-MAINI, SECRETARY-GENERAL OF THE EUROPEAN SATELLITE OPERATORS' ASSOCIATION (ESOA): EU MUST RESPECT INTERNATIONAL RULES

*Published on Europolitics
4 November 2008*

What do you expect from the telecoms package, on its way to adoption in the Council and the European Parliament?

In the framework of the current regulation, there are references to the International Telecommunication Union [ITU, a UN institution]. But in the original version of its proposal, the European Commission withdrew these references. Satellite operators, when they are updating their business plans, ensure, before anything else, that they have an orbital slot: a place in space where they will be able to put their satellite. This allows them to cover certain geographic areas and obtain the frequencies that they are authorised to use. This system works well. It is a global coordination process, at ITU level, and not at EU level.

Do you find the EP's report (voted on at first reading on 24 September) satisfactory?

Yes, we were insistent with the Parliament and it reintroduced many references to the ITU. The Commission wants to weaken them as much as possible. It does not want it to be said that its policy is compatible with the ITU regulation. It does not want to accept it at all, while we are pressing for it to be declared.

What are the consequences for satellite operators if the Commission imposes its views?

That would cause fragmentation. Because satellite operators' business plans are always global, it is very difficult to restrict them to Europe. If you take the three main operators - Inmarsat, SES and Eutelsat - all are developing in a global array, and not a European one, which does not really exist. It is therefore difficult to not respect the ITU rules, which have already allowed operators to work. The Commission's initial proposal set out a revision of usage rights for radiofrequencies every five years. The Parliament relaxed it a little by leaving this revision to member states' discretion, instead of making it compulsory. But revision after five years remains, and it is difficult for satellites. Because, in their case, their business plans are spread over 20 years. And if they want to start them now, they need to obtain an orbital slot from the ITU immediately to secure the region that they want to supply. They are going to invest, buy their satellite. But perhaps they will only launch in four years. Also, revising usage rights after five years could be damaging for satellite operators because their infrastructures will have been put in orbit.

Do you know what member states think about this?

They are divided. But we haven't seen any changes for the moment. At the same time, this revision could be profitable for us, because it can also be requested by users. So if an operator uses the radio spectrum, but under certain restrictions, it can ask for the regulator

for a revision to lift these restrictions. However, generally speaking, we would like to see these five years disappear or at least be extended. Some member states insist on total respect of the ITU rules, such as Italy. The UK, as well as Sweden and Denmark to a certain extent, have, I believe, problems with these rules.

Is the Commission not giving you enough attention?

We cannot be put on an equal footing with other information and communication technologies. I don't mean that we're better, but rather a little different: electronic signals come from space, which means that they have to be very strong. But when they arrive on earth, they are much more fragile than other signals. We have to ensure that we will be able to continue to offer services of the same quality, in the long term, by protecting them from harmful interference. We also think that we are part of the strategic infrastructures, to respond to public requirements, such as emergency situations. We are not dealing with information technology only.