

Final Declaration of the 21st European Forum on Electronic Signature and Trust Services June 10, 2021

The European Forum on Electronic Signature and Trust Services (EFPE), together with its 20-year history and status as the largest international conference in Europe dedicated to digital trust services and electronic identification, turned out to be an event of particular significance this year. This was a result of discussions held on the EC's review of the EU Regulation 910/2014 (eIDAS¹) established in 2014 in terms of its impact on the development of the EU digital market, also in the context of the global market, and the heated debate regarding proposals to introduce and regulate new trust services and electronic identification instruments in an amendment of the eIDAS Regulation.

Just like the last year, the Forum was organized as an online event. This allowed more than 700 representatives of academia, national and local authorities, businesses and international organizations operating in the field of electronic communications from 64 countries to participate in the event in spite of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic².

The presentations and discussion panels matched the main subject of this year's Forum, i.e. "e-identification and trust services as the future of the digital economy", with over 30 experts and practitioners of the global digital market sharing their expertise and opinions³.

Both experts and the broader audience were able express their views throughout the day using the Forum's online platform various functionalities. The general consensus was that interoperability and cross-border electronic trading, both in technical and legal terms, were essential in order to achieve widespread use of digital communications in administrative, business and consumer relations. This is why standards and legislation providing legal guarantees to digital market participants are of utmost importance. So far, the market for digital services has not been developing at a rate foreseen upon establishment of the eIDAS Regulation, though the legislation did act as a catalyst of sorts in that regard. Qualified electronic signature has become an interoperable instrument accepted not merely in the European Union member states, but also outside the EU, thanks to its recognition by applications supplied by global software vendors. However, that is still not sufficient for the automation and unification of legal market operations at the expected level. Hence proposals have emerged for new trust services, including, in particular, qualified electronic attribute

¹ eIDAS – Regulation (EU) 910/2014 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 July 2014 on electronic identification and trust services for electronic transactions in the internal market.

² List countries: Albania, Andorra, Austria, Saudi Arabia, Azerbaijan, Belgium, Bermuda, Belarus, Brazil, Bulgaria, Chile, China, Croatia, Denmark, Egypt, Estonia, Ethiopia, Finland, France, Greece, Spain, the Netherlands, India, Iran, Ireland, Israel, Japan, Kazakhstan, Colombia, Kosovo, Costa Rica, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Latvia, Macedonia, Malaysia, Germany, Nigeria, Norway, Pakistan, Peru, Poland, Portugal, Czech Republic, South Africa, Russia, Romania, El Salvador, Serbia, Singapore, Slovakia, United States, Switzerland, Sweden, Togo, Tunisia, Turkey, Uruguay, Hungary, Vietnam, Italy, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom

³ List countries: Azerbaijan, Belgium, Bulgaria, France, Spain, Japan, Luxembourg, Germany, Norway, Poland, Russia, USA, United Kingdom

authentication, which, combined with the electronic signature, should provide full information and ensure the identity of the person signing a document as well as their right to do so in relation to the document content. It is also worth mentioning that the experts and panelists participating in the EFPE conference have been calling for the introduction of this instrument into EU legislation at a qualified level for many years now.

The extension of qualified trust services to include electronic archiving of electronic documents and recording of electronic data into an electronic ledger are further positive developments. The qualified status of new trust services means achieving a broader scope and degree of trust and legal certainty of electronic business and public services (*qualified trust services are presumed trustworthy by law*).

Apart from trust services, a major part of the discussions held concerned electronic identification. In that regard, forum participants mostly shared the EC opinion pointing to unsatisfactory availability level of electronic identification solutions under the European eID scheme. The amendment to the eIDAS regulation envisages a more “revolutionary” approach to the issue by establishing European Digital Identity Wallets and imposing an obligation onto the member states to implement the tool within a relatively short time frame. While the idea of the wallet itself received positive feedback, some conference participants pointed out that the implementation was not clear enough and hence many doubts arose related to both technical and business implications.

Despite the fact that the draft regulation upholds the principle of technology neutrality, some participants pointed to blockchain as the only solution that could ensure secure implementation of new trust services in accordance with GDPR requirements. The former is not a universally shared view, though. A rational approach seems to be to consider the advantages and disadvantages of existing blockchain-based implementations and look for solutions combining new technologies with proven solutions already integrated on the market.

The conference participants were hopeful that the amended eIDAS regulation will take into account the lessons learned already and create a comprehensive legal, organizational and technical framework for overall application of electronic communications in virtually all kinds of business, civil and administrative relations rather than merely a fragmented one.

In practice, however, the progress will largely depend on the quality of the new legislation and the development of good standards in the short term, as well as the inclusion of relatively short but realistic deadlines within the legislation for the digital market players to start providing new trust and electronic identification services. Establishing public-private partnership initiatives seems to be necessary for that to succeed. The public administration should take advantage of the achievements and services provided by the commercial market while developing their own systems and services, in particular in the area of providing access to source data from central registers that constitute the basis for issuing attestations of attributes and electronic identification solutions. The EU digital market growth dynamics will also depend on the level of public funding allocated to finance projects implemented in the public and commercial sectors.

Conference participants and experts also noted the extent to which the pandemic has forced a sharp acceleration in the development of e-services. This was, however, often accompanied by higher risk levels that must be quickly mitigated if the upward trend in e-service development is to be sustained. Cyber security is an important theme raised by the Forum in the context of the digital economy development.

The conference also discussed the opportunities and threats arising out of quantum technology development and its impact on the security of trust services. Experts agree that efforts aimed at solutions based on quantum technology continue to accelerate and that over the course of the next decade their results may have a significant bearing on the shape the cryptographic systems are going to take. Deploying solutions with an eye toward protecting them from the potential impact of massive computing power arriving with the quantum technology seems to be of key importance.

Although this year's Forum was dominated by issues related to the draft amendment of the EU legislation covering trust and electronic identification services, multiple references to the global market were made just as well. The exchange of experiences and opinions in this area was both inspiring and indicative of the directions of the global digital economy.

The European Forum for Electronic Signature and Trust Services has been bringing together governments, businesses, technology solution providers and trust service enthusiasts for over 20 years. We are aware of the rapid pace at which the group of electronic identification and trust service beneficiaries is expanding, in line with their ever growing needs. With our conference, we want to provide them with platform to exchange their updated experiences, knowledge and latest views, which already go far beyond the electronic signature itself. The latter convinced us to change the name of the conference to **Trusted Economy Forum**, as trust services are inextricably linked with the digital economy we live in.