

Digital Sovereignty Requires Verifiable Interoperability

Why Open Standards Alone Are Not Enough

The 4future.institute is an independent Austrian think tank. Independence is a precondition of our work – not its result. We ask: what is actually going on here? What are the structural conditions? And above all: does this make sense – not just economically, but for us as a society? This paper deepens the interoperability dimension of the policy brief *"Digital Sovereignty in Europe"* (2025/26). Interoperability and the genuine ability to switch digital platforms are among the most central – and so far most underestimated – preconditions for digital sovereignty.

Europe has open standards and norms for digital collaboration. But open standards alone do not produce digital sovereignty.

The Structural Problem

De facto standards are set by market power, not by norms

Microsoft Office holds approximately 80% market share in the enterprise segment. Established open standards exist for calendar and address book access. Microsoft does not support them – as a result, Outlook can only be used with third-party servers with considerable difficulty, if at all.

At 80% market share, the implementation practices of the dominant vendor become the de facto standard – regardless of intent or norm. Microsoft is not the accused in this paper. It is the example.

ISO norms do not protect against incompatibility

OOXML, the document format used by Microsoft Office, has been an ISO standard since 2008. Microsoft does not fully comply with this norm itself – despite having lobbied hard to establish it. As a result, it is barely possible for other office software vendors to read or edit Microsoft documents without errors. Not even Microsoft itself renders complex documents consistently across its desktop, web, and mobile versions.

The actual reference standard is a single software configuration – not a norm. Formal openness does not automatically produce practical interoperability.

The Challenge for Users

Many organisations would gladly switch to alternative solutions for digital collaboration. In practice, everyday documents – presentations containing tables, documents with tables of contents – frequently do not work reliably enough across platforms to make switching a risk-free proposition.

When a presentation renders incorrectly at a client's site, the **reputational risk** falls not on the platform vendor – but on the organisation that chose to switch.

→ The absence of practical interoperability becomes a real switching barrier.



The Regulatory Gap

The Digital Markets Act does not reach here

The DMA regulates so-called gatekeepers. Microsoft Office meets every quantitative DMA threshold – and was nonetheless not designated as a gatekeeper. The actual platform lock-in does not arise from absent standards, but from the substantial technical and organisational costs of switching in practice.

Europe regulates app stores. But not the office software on which large parts of its economy run.

What Europe Needs Now

Verifiable interoperability – not formal standardisation. A system of four interconnected measures:

1. European Interoperability Certification

Three levels: standard support – full interoperability – lossless migration.

What is regulated is not the vendor, but a verifiable property of the product.

2. National Pilot Framework

Austrian Standards International as a model for a national pilot that can be scaled to the European level.

3. Binding Procurement Requirements

Public bodies procure only certified systems. Public procurement becomes a strategic lever for change.

4. DMA Extension

Interoperability obligations for digital work platforms – closing the regulatory gap the DMA currently leaves open.

Core Statement:

Standards without verifiable conformance are not standards. They are promises.

Digital sovereignty means the freedom to choose and to switch. Europe now has the opportunity to enforce the difference – between formal openness and genuine freedom of choice. And thereby genuine innovation.

About the Author

Werner Illsinger spent 18 years in senior positions at Microsoft – including as a first-hand witness of the OOXML standardisation debate in 2008. He knows the mechanisms described here from personal experience.

Today he is Executive Director of the 4future.institute and founder of 4future.

"I have seen how standards are made. And how they are broken."

Further Information

More information, background analysis and additional resources are available at: <https://4future.institute>

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