

Portugal shows the way in drive to open up public sector IT systems

As Portugal puts the final touches to a set of rules designed to help its public sector break free from IT vendor lock-in, OpenForum Europe congratulates its government for shaping one of the most enlightened laws of its kind in Europe.

An Open Standards Law adopted with cross-party support in April requires an accompanying regulation and a list of approved open standards to take practical effect. These texts are currently the subject of a public consultation.

Once finalized, this legal framework will help ensure that ministries and public agencies in Portugal always select IT systems built on open standards. Like many countries in Europe, Portugal's public sector has remained largely locked into expensive, proprietary computer systems until now.

The only way to ensure that Portugal's public sector gets the best value for money from its computer systems is by insisting that suppliers adhere to open standards. That way they will be able to choose from the widest selection of suppliers, including ones that build systems around open source and free software infrastructures.

Getting best value for money always makes sense, but never more so than at a time when a government is implementing drastic cost-cutting measures to shore up its public finances, as most governments across the European Union are right now.

Without the Open Standards Law, Portugal runs the risk of remaining locked into the proprietary computer systems of a few large vendors. During these times of austerity it is therefore urgent that Portugal's Council of Ministers approve the regulation and the list of open standards without delay once the public consultation closes.

Once it takes effect, Portugal's Open Standards Law will stimulate competition among SMEs, who until now have largely been excluded from tendering for public sector IT contracts. The law will therefore have a positive impact both at a macro- and a micro-economic level.

With its Open Standards law, Portugal has joined the E.U. premier league along with countries including the UK, Belgium, Denmark and the Netherlands. Some vendors with a vested interest in maintaining the status quo might try to stall the adoption of the regulation and list of open standards, or try to undermine the Open Standards Law at this late stage. OFE urges the Portuguese government to stand firm and not to let anything obstruct the application of a truly enlightened piece of legislation.