

Declaration for cooperation and exchange of best practices in the field of self-sovereign identity between the Federal Republic of Germany and the Republic of Finland

Context

We are living a historical moment in time: the COVID19 pandemic, more than any other event in recent history, has highlighted the need for digital services and laid bare the shortcomings in digitisation prevalent across our continent. It has also shown how digital solutions, designed having users' needs and preferences in mind, can help tackle effectively and efficiently the various issues our societies are facing, making them more resilient.

Digital identity - or the ability to make claims about who you are in a digital space - is a fundamental building block in today's world. Many digital interactions, and especially those that are most relevant, like dealing with public authorities, using internet banking, or buying online, require parties being able to identify each other reliably, and to share identity information between them in a secure and trustworthy way while keeping control over that information.

Thus, digital identity constitutes the foundational layer upon which digital services - public and private alike - can be provided to our citizens. It is one of the most important levers European Member States and the European Union as a whole have to fulfil the potential of our economies and the European single market in a digital world.

However, the window of opportunity to influence the future of digital identity in Europe is narrowing: several major players are moving into this space and will soon be determining the future of digital identity, including for European citizens. Therefore, it is important that we take common action in order to ensure that all solutions and components of digital identity will meet European standards and will reflect European ethical values on Digital sovereignty. Acknowledging the Berlin Declaration on Digital society and Value-Based Digital Government from December 2020¹, which was signed by all EU Member States, it is also our common interest that the people of Europe maintain autonomy by keeping control over their data and its use.

We have a unique opportunity to prevent this by acting now and creating a bold vision for digital identity nationally and in Europe, inspired by the European approach to digitalisation, which puts people at its core and is rooted at the European common principles and values. It is a vision that gives citizens the full control of their digital identities, making sure that the identity rights granted offline are also enforceable online. Getting this right could mean a step-change in digital sovereignty and support the growth of our economies and the European single market at such a crucial moment in time.

¹ https://www.bmi.bund.de/SharedDocs/downloads/EN/eu-presidency/gemeinsame-erklaerungen/berlin-declaration-digital-society.pdf;jsessionid=BC3ECF9EF5B4C80582A606A8993C2C21.2_cid373?__blob=publicationFile&v=6

No single European Member State will be able to do this on its own. We will only succeed by working hand in hand and providing a viable and attractive digital identity counter offer to our citizens while keeping fundamental human rights in mind. Being aware of this opportunity, Germany and Finland have decided to join forces to tackle this challenge.

Self-sovereign identity approach

Digital identity has seen incredible developments and progress over the last years. Its evolution has seen a move from centralised, to federated, to self-sovereign identity (SSI).

In short, our SSI approach allows a citizen to be in full control (sovereign) of all their identity attributes and manage their use in a secure, distributed way mainly from their smartphone. Our SSI approach constitutes a step-change in the evolution of digital identity and contributes to the European goal to be digitally sovereign. Further, it marks a significant improvement in usability and increase in utility for the citizen, which could finally solve the adoption problems we have seen across the continent. Finally, it constitutes the gold standard in privacy-by-design identity approaches and would further cement Europe's reputation as the global leader in privacy.

Several initiatives are already on their way in Europe, highlighting the momentum SSI is gaining:

1. Germany and Spain have signed a Memorandum of Understanding to exchange best practices in the field of self-sovereign digital identity. Finland will be joining this cooperation.
2. Germany - spearheaded by Chancellor Angela Merkel - has prioritised digital identification as a key focus area in 2021 and is already implementing a nationwide public-private SSI initiative which has officially launched with its first use case in May 2021 with further use cases lined up over the coming months.
3. As part of the Finnish Government programme, in October 2021 the Ministry of Finance has set up the Digital Identity -project which aims to provide equal opportunities for everyone to use their digital identity both in public and private services and a way to users to control their own data
4. The European Commission recently published their proposal for an updated eIDAS regulation, the main framework governing the use of digital identities in Europe, in order to allow for a European Digital Identity. With its focus on user-centric, wallet-based digital identity as well as the provision of electronic ledgers and electronic attestations of attributes as trust services, the new eIDAS seems to support and facilitate the use of SSI at a European level.
5. In 2020 eight leading EU Member States launched the 'Coalition of the Willing' and joined forces to learn and experiment together in the field of digital transformation of the public sector. This coalition, amongst other activities, formed a digital identity working group. The German-Finnish cooperation in the field of digital identity will build upon the lessons from this coalition.

Objective

In light of the context laid out above, the Federal Republic of Germany and the Republic of Finland jointly decide to pursue opportunities for collaborating on cross-border digital identity based on self-sovereign identity.

With the signing of this declaration, Finland will join the already existing cooperation between Germany and the Kingdom of Spain on this topic.

In particular, the sides envision the following four objectives:

1. Sharing best practices and knowledge (technical, regulatory, operational) in the sphere of digital identity. While both sides recognise the technological neutrality of the EU initiatives, this cooperation will focus particularly on SSI technology.
2. Exploring how to ensure that identity documents and digital identity credentials issued by the State remain at the core of the self-sovereign wallet-based ecosystem, so that digital identities based on SSI originate securely and reliably from them.
3. Designing and conceptualising a cross-border pilot in 2022
4. Using their experiences in the pilot to provide input for the development of the common Union Toolbox for a coordinated approach towards a European Digital Identity Framework, as recommended by the European Commission
5. Creating a joint digital identity working group to coordinate objectives 1 to 4

Furthermore, the sides commit to present results at regular intervals to all relevant stakeholders.

Both countries wish to keep this collaboration open to other Member states willing to progress on the implementation of cross-border pilots based on self-sovereign identity, and encourage them to join the initiative.

The signatories of this declaration invite digital identity stakeholders to support this collaboration.

Signed in duplicate at Helsinki on 22.09.2021

For the Federal Republic of Germany

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