

CONSTANTIJN VAN ORANJE, Member of Cabinet of Ms. Neelie Kroes, Vice-President for Digital Agenda, European Commission, welcomed the participants and opened the Global Forum by presenting with great competence and commitment

The Digital Agenda for Europe

The reason launching a Digital Agenda for Europe is that ICT is no longer only about technology. ICT produces 50% of productivity growth in Europe. The Internet market in Europe is by now growing at a pace of 12% and is already bigger than the economy of Belgium. Moreover, ICT represents a majority of venture capital investment and is a major driver for innovation. But it is much more than that: The Internet as a social media has empowered citizens, patients, consumers, and activists. Open data used in public sector information enables redesign of public services, representing a market in Europe of around 50 to 140 billion EUR per anno -- if released effectively.

ICT will be a major component for ensuring sustainability of healthcare systems. It also represents a response to the demographic challenge that this continent is facing. Moreover, energy efficiency will not be achieved in a way it would without ICT.

ICT is empowering, it is transformative and it is challenging. It is challenging because it raises new challenges like global governance; new business models; disruption of existing markets and organizations. New forms of exclusion are emerging based on a lack of skills or the lack of access. Fragmentation of online markets is a problem that we are facing, and Internet security and cyber-crime are new issues to deal with.

The Digital Agenda addresses these challenges to unlock growth potential of ICT markets and to enable the powers of ICT to drive innovation, competitiveness and efficiency and to support the effective deployment of ICT to meet the societal challenges, without which the EU will not be in a position to grow its way out of the crisis we are currently facing.

The EU has a lot of potential: There are great scientists, very interesting technologies, many very powerful start-ups, strong telecommunication companies, and world class standards – just to name a few. But Europe is also facing a lack in investment in broadband, low levels of venture capital, difficulties in commercialising these technologies and scaling up small enterprises. There are no major players in cloud computing, nor in operating platforms and still 27% of the EU population has never been online and are lacking the necessary skills to be full digital citizens.

The Digital Agenda is focusing on seven major areas of concern -- major bottlenecks:

1) One is creating the environment for broadband investment through spectrum policy but also by helping financing through projects bonds, which will be piloted in 2013. The Commission aims to leverage project financing for the roll-out of high speed broadband. From 2014 the Commission envisages more structural and sustained funding through the Connecting Europe Facility.

2) A major priority is removing the barriers to the digital single market. Of course there is a digital single market, but it is mostly illegal (piracy). Ironically, while the barriers are removed in the real world, they are reappearing or appearing in different forms in the digital world. Therefore we need a coherent cloud policy for the 27 Member States, privacy policy that is harmonized across the EU, a fully interoperable identity management infrastructure, rules for public procurement, copyright -- all these are areas the EU needs to deal with to create a single digital market.

3) The third priority is making sure that people have access to Internet and be able to use the Internet in a secure way. The trust that people have in using the Internet, using technologies and transacting online is absolutely key.

4) Moreover, the Commission wants to improve interoperability and standards to allow systems and solutions to communicate with each other and creating platforms for open innovation.

5) To anticipate the future – and this is something the European Commission has always been very strong in the DG that Ms Kroes is responsible for – is to invest in research. Over a billion EUR is invested in research each year and this continues to increase, supporting those entities in Europe that do the top in class and excellence in research and ICT.

6) Furthermore there is a need to ensure that people have the access and the skills to be able to engage in the digital single market and the digital society.

7) And finally, there is a need for the right frameworks for ICT to be deployed effectively to deal with societal challenges like climate change, congestion and mobility and other issues.

All of this takes place in a global context. Therefore there is a need for efficient international cooperation, for trade, for collaboration in standards, in R&D, but also in governance and dealing with security challenges. None of which stop at the borders of Europe.

We experience a high pace of change and need to keep up, knowing that the traditional instruments of the Commission, such as regulation, are often too slow and too rigid to deal with the challenges ahead. To be effective the Commission focuses on setting the right framework conditions for markets, the civil society and governments to make the transition towards the digital area.

However, all this cannot be done alone but has to be done together with all stakeholders, both public and private. Everybody has to take responsibility to move forward in the digital area. It is not an option – Europe has to succeed in its ambitions to be able to overcome the current crisis and to grow. Society and policy makers have to be aware that ICT is the area of the future and this is where we need to invest.

Ms Kroes, who is sending its greetings to the participants of the Global Forum, is extremely dedicated to this cause.