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The EC Information Society Policies Today and in the Years to Come

The framework document of the EU Information Society policy i2010 will be launched in the middle of next year. i2010 is based on three pillars: i) Creating the European information space and getting the regulatory framework right; ii) addressing the challenge of how to do more and better research in the domain of ICT; iii) addressing a number of societal challenges, like inclusion, public services and quality of life.

The regulatory framework discussions are starting and the Commission is currently preparing its proposals. The keyword in this context is “competition”. Competition will drive the renewal and the communications framework. As regards R&D, there is the 7th Framework Programme that will probably be decided by the end of this year. For ICT it will mean an increase of 35% as compared with the FP6. This may not be enough, but it is not possible to do everything at a European level and there is a real challenge for the Member States to make a similar effort in increasing their research efforts. Concerning the aspect of inclusion, there has been a ministerial conference in Riga in June this year where the framework has been defined. Moreover, the e-Government Action Plan has been launched to transform the public sector. It is important to stimulate the Member States, because the competence of the Commission in these domains is very limited – both in terms of legislative power and budget.

As regards public services, the focus is on more efficient public services and connectivity. 45% of the GDP in Europe is spent in the public sector. Efficient public services are a key element for competitiveness – and this is not only a matter of cost cutting, but also of quality. High quality public institutions are very important for innovation. Those countries with high quality public institutions score a lot higher on the innovation charts than those countries who do not have such institutions. The specific European challenge in the context of public services is interoperability. Citizens increasingly move and want to be sure that their social services follow them across borders. Thus, it is important to assure that citizens moving from one country to another can still access the services.

Healthcare is another major challenge: 9% of the GDP in Europe is spent on healthcare (compared to 40% in the U.S.). In Europe, the healthcare spending is expected to double in the coming 15 years. At the same time, patients are becoming more demanding and increasingly mobile. The Commission recently launched a consultation on what should be done to ensure legal certainty for patients who move. ICT can do a lot to improve efficiency of the healthcare sector. It can also improve the access to healthcare in remote regions and contribute to improve quality and safety. In the U.S., twice as many people die from medical errors than from road accidents. 80% of these errors are linked to breakdowns in the communication chain or wrong medication. Europe has a strong health industry: 3 out of the 4 top health industries are European. Here is an area where one can combine societal challenges with an industrial base.

Regarding inclusiveness, 30-40% of the European population does not yet actively participate in the Information Society. There is a combination of a challenge for Europe and for the private sector. Europe has limited competences but can bring Member States together and set examples of pilots.

Generally speaking, the policies for the Information Society are in place. The first and the second pillar are well on the way and in the coming years the focus will shift towards the third pillar addressing societal challenges with the help of ICT. The real challenge there is to create win-win situations. It is important to use ICT not only to improve administrations or the healthcare system, but also to build on Europe’s knowledge and industrial base. Challenges are not unique and therefore there is a real chance for Europe.

The following **Q&A** of the presentation referred to the question whether private companies are rather interested in e-Inclusion or rather reluctant due to the cost involved. Frans de Bruïne emphasized that technological development and convergence make it much easier to design accessible products, e.g. products that are also accessible for elderly people. Many problems related to accessibility can be addressed with a little bit of effort and a little bit of creativity. However, as the conference in Riga had shown, there is a lot more interest from the U.S. industry than from the EU industry.