

Speech Global Forum 2005

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Brussels - Egmont

Mr President of the European Commission,
Madam Commissioner,
Colleagues Ministers,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honour for me, and a great pleasure, to open the first session of this 2005 Global Forum. Let me first tell you how much Guy Verhofstadt, Prime Minister, is sorry not to be able to be with you this morning as he had promised.

Convergence as well as the transformation of society and economy are at the core of your planned work for these two days.

Challenges are important and having a look at your work program, it seems that not only you are aware of them but are ready to tackle them with all the depth needed. Convergence in infrastructures and systems, in software and contents, in regulation and governance in a secure environment are main challenges for today's economy.

I have no doubt that Mr Barroso and Mrs Reding will tell you about the way Europe addresses these challenges, through the Lisbon strategy and the i2010 initiative inter alia.

So, what do we do in Belgium to meet convergence and the changes it implies for society and economy?

We first try to put in place the conditions for making it a better place to live and work. E-Government has become an essential element of our strategy and its benefits are now showing more clearly.

The collection of data for social security matters or related to enterprises is done only once but the data is accessible to all official services that need them and that know where the authentic source is available. Public services thus save a lot of the time they used to collect and process data. Of course, adequate safeguards must be put into place in order to ensure that the authentic source is accurate and cannot be accessed by unauthorized persons.

Other initiatives such as the payment of taxes through Internet and the delivery of the electronic identity card have more and more success in Belgium.

A lot of work is done in many administrations in order to improve the electronic service to the citizen or to the enterprise.

We also hope that all this will be interoperable at European level and we insist in a lot of European fora to adopt a European approach regarding the exchange of data regarding enterprises and citizens. It seems to us very important to make sure that for example data over enterprises can be accessible from some other country if one public administration is launching a public procurement procedure.

In the same manner, if other European countries opt for electronic ID, it would be quite useful to make sure that the adopted systems are compatible enough to be usable by the services concerned.

Another field in which the Belgian government has taken steps is Internet security: we launched a campaign towards the public to improve the safe use of Internet together with other specific measures in order to reinforce the confidence in e-commerce in Belgium. We are analysing the practices of trusted third parties today in Belgium and in other countries in order to draft a framework with the necessary minimum guaranties for trusted third parties when they assist Internet users in online transactions. We are also planning to develop new systems to inform the users about their rights. We will also put in place a unique online point of contact for complaints of consumers regarding Internet and e-commerce. We are also taking measures to fight spam but we are particularly convinced that in that domain a European or even more global approach is very necessary.

As we all know the broadband penetration is fairly good in Belgium even though we could not maintain the historical advantage we had a few years ago. The access of Belgian companies to the Internet (including broadband) is very widespread. However, the proportion of companies that receive their orders on line or that sell via the Internet still needs to be increased.

According to Eurostat, 20% of companies in Belgium bought via the Internet (at least 1%) in 2002, 15% of companies received orders via the Internet (at least 1% in 2002, while the European average (EU 15) was 12% and 7 %, respectively. Swedish and Irish companies bought the most via the Internet and Dutch companies sold the most via the Internet.

A recent council of ministers also adopted specific measures to fight the digital divide in Belgium: it has been decided to establish 300 new "digital public spaces" where the population can freely access Internet and enjoy the help and assistance of persons especially trained to guide and help them through the net. These public spaces must be open and perform other activities related to a better integration of various categories of persons. We hope that this initiative will contribute to improving the general "connectivity" of the Belgian population.

But we must admit that Belgian citizens use less the computer in their daily life than citizens of neighbouring countries.

We have taken initiatives to improve the situation by giving specific opportunities for people to buy a personal computer at a good price. Yet, the take off is still a little slow.

In order to improve globally the use of Information and Communication Technologies in the Belgian economy, we have launched a strategic platform devoted to ICT. The objective is to develop Belgium's scientific potential in the ICT field. In particular, the platform must put our research centres in a position to participate in the future European Union Framework Programme and obtain industrial R&D contracts. It must also encourage the creation of spin-offs in the sector and start research activities in the area of e-applications.

In order to better follow the development of the Information society in Belgium, we have also started a new tool called the Barometer for a Networked Society. Benchmarking the development of the network society in Belgium in comparison with other countries, will help the authorities to adjust the public policies in this realm.

With all these initiatives, we hope to improve the penetration of the ICT and of the e-economy in the Belgian society.

I would not be surprised if the opportunities offered by digital television were to help the Belgian population entering the information society more thoroughly.

Digital TV sets sell very well in Belgium and new offers are finding their way through the somewhat complicated Belgian landscape.

Triple plays is one of these new opportunities. As you all know it offers television, Internet and telephony on the same bandwidth. The fight is becoming fiercer between the various operators able to enter this new market. The main operators are now investing heavily in Belgium. The incumbent telecom operator for example is rolling out a fibreglass local network in order to be able to offer higher speed and capacities to its clients. Cable operators are also very active in Belgium and they represent more than 35% of the access to high speed Internet in Belgium.

The very high-speed offers which are now developing on the Belgian market and that are made by cable operators, by the incumbent or by alternative telecommunication operators, all using innovative technologies such as EURODOCSIS2.0 for the cable operators, and xDSL for Belgacom and the alternative operators.

For the regulatory authority, it is essential to make sure that alternative operators are able to replicate the offers of the incumbent by acceding to offers at a wholesale level that allow them to propose innovative products at the retail level. Obligations relating to the unbundling of the local loop or to the bitstream access will of course be maintained until the market will be more competitive.

For what regards triple play, Belgacom has launched interactive digital television services and Telenet is also offering digital television services. I am sure that more innovative offers will come on the market in the following months.

I will now wish you a very productive work during these two days.

Thank you.

Marc Verwilghen

Minister for the Economy, Energy, Foreign Trade and Science
Policy