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from :	Presidency
to :	COREPER/COUNCIL
Subject :	The impact of the economic downturn on ICT and how ICT can boost EU's economy – Exchange of views

ICT in the time of crisis

Over the last few years, the information and communication technologies have shown us, particularly on the example of Ireland and Finland, the significance of modern technologies for the growth of economy, which is today more than ever built on knowledge and innovations.

Our experience of the last couple of months demonstrates that on the one hand, the ICT industry has been affected similarly to other sectors, but on the other, it offers a whole number of opportunities for helping Europe out of the crisis. With modern technologies, individuals can be more efficient in finding new jobs and return to work more quickly. The dynamic development in the area of teleconferences can significantly reduce travelling expenses and the carbon footprint.

Making full use of new technologies, however, requires a further development of services and infrastructure, which needs to be built also in rural areas. Resources invested in the ICT infrastructure and the expansion of the broadband are “smart investments”, instrumental in creating new job opportunities for all kinds of professions and offering a long-term increase in the quality of life, e.g. in the form of easier and cheaper communication with relatives living hundreds and thousands of kilometres away, or the eHealth or eGovernment services.

In order to create new jobs and support economic growth, the European Commission has in the framework of the European Economic Recovery Plan proposed a 5 billion € package to be directed at defined goals such as energy and broadband. The aim of this initiative in the area of broadband Internet is not only to support the development of broadband infrastructure especially in rural areas, but also to improve the already existing one. The Czech Presidency aims at agreeing the Package as soon as possible in the first half of 2009.

In the context of the current economic crisis, it is also important to remember the important role of the ICT in individual private sector and public administration processes; advanced and generally accessible eGovernment services increase the efficiency of activities and save the time and money of all entities involved. The current i2010 strategy has been conducive to the implementation of a number of measures thanks to which the European information society can build on such values as growth and employment. However, to succeed in the global economic competition, Europe must go on building a single information space in order to create maximum synergies.

In the area of the ICT, we must particularly realize that the European Single Market, with a free movement of persons or services, brings an increased demand on interoperability, as public administration services must be provided electronically irrespective of geographic borders between individual states. Thus, Europe without barriers also in the ICT area requires solutions allowing e.g. full on-line public procurement, reducing costs on the one hand and increasing competitiveness on the other. Another challenge is mutual recognition of electronic identity documents which should make electronic public administration services accessible from any place and at any time.

In connection with the expiring mandate of the i2010 strategy and in the light of the current financial crisis, it is necessary to look beyond the short perspective of a next few months and set priorities for the years to come.

At the Ministerial Conference on eCommunications held on 17 February in Prague, Telecommunications Ministers agreed that in order to ensure higher investments in electronic communications, it was necessary to provide the European companies with a sound regulatory framework which would ensure their competitiveness on the world market and allow them to offer innovative and quality services for their customers.

During the Competitiveness Council on 6 March 2009, the Ministers of the 27 EU Member States agreed to further boost European research and promote new research facilities of Europe-wide significance, as promising ways of responding to the current economic downturn.

At the meeting of the Council of Ministers for Telecommunications on 31 March 2009, focussing on information society, we would like to discuss the following issues:

- In what ways do you see ICT and broadband promoting growth and competitiveness, especially in order to emerge from the economic crisis?
- What steps are you taking to encourage the take-up of broadband in your country? What are the aims of national strategies for broadband that you have launched or that are in preparation?
- In what form should the European policy for information society and the media (post-i2010) incorporate the fight against the crisis and the potential of the ICT?