Brussels, 16 March 2006

OPINION
of the
Committee of the Regions
of 16 February 2006
on the
**Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament,
the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions
i2010 - A European Information Society for Growth and Employment**
COM(2005) 229 final

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THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

HAVING REGARD TO the Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on *i2010 – A European Information Society for Growth and Employment*, COM(2005) 229 final;

HAVING REGARD TO the European Commission's decision of 1 June 2005 to request its opinion on this subject under Article 265(1) of the Treaty establishing the European Community;

HAVING REGARD TO the decision taken by its Bureau on 12 April 2005 to instruct the Commission for Culture and Education to draw up the opinion on the subject;

HAVING REGARD TO the Lisbon strategy which aims to make the European Union "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world [by 2010], capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion";

HAVING REGARD TO the appeal by the European Council in Brussels (22 and 23 March 2005) to the Commission to relaunch the Lisbon strategy without delay with economic growth and employment as the watchwords[1];

HAVING REGARD TO the Presidency Conclusions of the European Council held in Brussels on 22 and 23 March 2005 according to which "it is essential to build a fully inclusive information society, based on widespread use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in public services, SMEs and households. To that end, the i2010 initiative will focus on ICT research and innovation, content industry development, the security of networks and information, as well as convergence and interoperability in order to establish a seamless information area."[2];

HAVING REGARD TO its Opinion on the Communication from the Commission on *eEurope 2005 action plan: An update* (CdR 193/2004 fin)[3];

HAVING REGARD TO its Opinion on the Communication from the Commission *Connecting Europe at High Speed: National Broadband Strategies* (CdR 257/2004 fin)[4];

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[1] Presidency Conclusions, European Council held in Brussels on 22 and 23 March 2005, 7619/1/05 REV1, point 8, http://ue.eu.int:docCenter.asp.

[2] Presidency Conclusions, European Council held in Brussels on 22 and 23 March 2005, 7619/1/05 REV1, point 18, http://ue.eu.int:docCenter.asp.

[3] OJ C71 of 22 March 2005, p. 59.

[4] OJ C71 of 22 March 2005, p. 55.

HAVING REGARD TO its Opinion on the Communication from the Commission *The future of European regulatory audiovisual policy* (CdR 67/2004 fin)[5];

HAVING REGARD TO its Opinion on the Communication from the Commission *Science and Technology: the key to Europe's future – guidelines for future European policy to support research* (CdR 194/2004 fin)[6];

HAVING REGARD TO its Outlook Opinion on *The role of universities in local and regional development within the context of a Europe of knowledge* (CdR 89/2003 fin)[7];

HAVING REGARD TO the opinion (CdR 252/2005 rev. 2) adopted on 7 December 2005 by the Commission for Culture and Education (rapporteur **Mr Theodoros Georgakis, Mayor of Ilioupoli** (EL/PES);

Whereas:

1.   Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) can contribute directly and indirectly, to a considerable extent, to meeting the goals of the Lisbon strategy;

2.   The ambitious plan for connection at high speeds, taking into account equal rights and digital opportunities without the introduction of discrimination, for a pan-European information infrastructure, must play a major role in the approach of the whole of Europe, the Member States of the EU and all the future candidate countries, the cities and rural areas, enterprises and citizens;

3.   Investments in research and innovation are of decisive importance and must naturally be increased so that the ICT sector continues to contribute to development and employment;

4.   It is of vital importance to develop an effective and modern information infrastructure for new and existing enterprises and modernised public services;

5.   Equal opportunities in the information society must be counted among the rights of European citizens as regards interconnectedness and services independently of the type of user, the social situation and the location;

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5   OJ C318 of 22 December 2004, p. 27.

6   OJ C71 of 12 March 2005, p. 22.

7   OJ C73 of 23 March 2005, p. 55.

6.   The information infrastructure and the broadband provision will need to be regarded and managed in the same way as water and electricity supplies;

adopted the following opinion at its 63ʳᵈ plenary session, held on 15/16 February 2006 (meeting of 16 February):

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1.   **Views of the Committee of the Regions**

General Comments

The Committee of the Regions

1.1   **welcomes** the concise nature and the clarity of the Commission's analysis and conclusions in its Communication on *i2010: A European Information Society for growth and employment*;

1.2   **agrees** with the statement that knowledge, research and innovation are driving forces of sustainable development;

1.3   **firmly supports** the view that building a fully inclusive information society is one of the priority tasks;

1.4   **accepts** the view that ICT constitute a powerful lever for development and employment, in line with the statistical data indicating that 25% of the increase in GDP and 40% of the increase in productivity in the European Union are due to ICT;

1.5   **recognises** that the digital convergence of services, networks, equipment and means of mass communications is rapidly taking place, with the result that the channels of access for citizens to the wealth of information are being broadened;

1.6   **points out** that the achievement of digital convergence is facilitated by social convergence and the establishment of sets of operational rules;

1.7   **welcomes** the i2010 strategy for the European information society and agrees with the general policy orientations and the basic priorities;

1.8   **agrees** that the i2010 strategy serves the open and competitive digital economy and makes provision for quality and avoidance of social exclusion;

1.9   **underlines** the importance of defining the three priorities of the i2010 strategy and agrees on:

- completion of the Single European Information Space
- support for innovation and investment in research
- an information society for all without social exclusions and with the emphasis on better public services and quality of life;

1.10   **expresses** the conviction that the i2010 initiative will contribute to improving the quality of life for citizens and more generally to a better society.

As regards the Single European Information Space,

the Committee of the Regions

1.11   **supports** the forward-looking policy approach of the European Commission, taking the view that in the ICT market of the European Union there is vast potential which must be fully exploited. A single European market with rules which do not differ from one country to another is particularly suitable for entrepreneurial activity;

1.12   **underlines** the need to recognise and give shape to the role of regional and local authorities in implementing the i2010 strategy;

1.13   **is pleased to note** the attempt to tackle the main challenges, but points out that the results will be evaluated taking account also of the proposed action programmes;

1.14   **underlines that** the challenge of achieving faster broadband services in structurally weak and disadvantaged areas calls for the allocation of significant resources from the Structural Funds and that those of achieving rich information content, interoperability and security of transactions call for the allocation of significant resources from the research and development programmes;

1.15   **takes the view** that high-quality broadband access at reasonable prices is one of the major factors in determining the quality of services for citizens, in particular, by increasing the quality of services provided by local authorities while making it easier for small and medium-sized enterprises to offer their products for sale. Remote regions and communities especially the outermost ones in particular are expected to benefit considerably from more and faster access to broadband services;

1.16   **underlines** that society is particularly sensitive to questions of consumer protection and personal data protection, a fact which must be taken into account in formulating the strategy and the operating rules of the ICT market;

1.17   **expresses**, by extension, the conviction that the new ICT services and applications should in all cases respect the rules of data protection, while consumers must always have the opportunity to check on the processing which their personal data undergo. The "raising awareness of the need for self-protection" proposed by the Communication[8] will also need to be accompanied by stronger safeguards;

1.18   **attaches special importance** to the security of transactions, to combating illegal and harmful Internet content, and to the need for the EU to guarantee that services and high quality communications are offered at reasonable prices, ensuring territorial cohesion throughout the EU, with special attention focusing on remote and outermost regions;

1.19   **takes the view** that the content of the new services and the new digital media must not be planned only on the basis of economic criteria but must be developed according to social and cultural needs;

1.20   **encourages** the setting up of science parks and the development of a suitable framework for investment by small and medium-sized enterprises.

As regards innovation and investment in research,

the Committee of the Regions

1.21   **strongly supports** the European Commission's approach to more and better ICT research in Europe. However, on this subject, it will be necessary to ensure a transfer of the ensuing knowledge, producing results in such a way that the whole of European industry benefits and that progress towards the Lisbon goals is maintained in all regions;

1.22   **holds the view** that it is necessary to ensure a high budget allocation for research in the 2007-2013 period, "even if other parts of the budgetary plans for the period 2007-2013 were to change"[9];

1.23   **underlines** the fact that despite the vital importance which the transformation of research results into products has for every economy and every technology, the special features of the ICT sector will need to be taken carefully into account. This is particularly true in as much as ICT influence the way in which local and regional authorities work (on-line governance), are organised and carry out their tasks (supplying a range of services to the individual, co-managing historical and environmental heritage, co-managing infrastructure and networks for local mobility, on-line learning, on-line health, teleworking etc.).

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[8]   Page 6 of the Communication.

[9]   CdR 194/2004, point 1.6 (Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on the future of European research; rapporteur: J. Myllyvirta).

1.24 **recalls** that in any case, ICT are a key factor for improving coordination and cooperation in various fields between local, regional national and European authorities, and between them and European citizens and private entities. Moreover, ICT provide a major opportunity to improve public services.

As regards the information society for all, without social exclusions, emphasising better public services and quality of life,

the Committee of the Regions

1.25 **emphasises** the need to maintain a balance between the positive economic effects of ICT and the likely social, legal and cultural consequences of their introduction for the life of European citizens. It is therefore essential for ICT strategies to be linked with the policies on youth and education and fundamental human rights;

1.26 **shares** the view that ICT may be expected to boost quality of life, and that their more widespread use might enhance existing ICT-based health services and facilitate the establishment of new ones, thereby helping to improve people's health overall and give them better and more effective access to public health services;

1.27 **considers** that the use of ICT as a new "cultural technique" alongside reading and writing may lead to a decline in the traditional sources and channels of information (newspapers, correspondence). So that these basic skills can be maintained, it is necessary for learning through ICT to complement traditional forms of communication rather than to replace them;

1.28 **continues to point out** the need to maintain cultural and linguistic diversity. The use of a single language as the most important one in the ICT sector[10] must not influence the necessary supply of specialised services for citizens in all languages, as well as respect for multiculturalism and multilingualism;

1.29 **points out** the need for digitalisation of the written European cultural heritage so that it can be preserved for future generations. This effort must be made in all languages, for all regions and for all countries of Europe;

1.30 **emphasises** that ICT use should produce substantial gains in productivity rates and in competitiveness, generating major benefits for society;

1.31 **endorses** the three "flagship" proposal priorities identified for ICT: the needs of the ageing society, safe and clean transport and cultural and linguistic diversity;

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[10] It is estimated that 80% of the content of the worldwide web has been produced in English (source: www.englishenglish.com).

1.32   **highlights** the importance of using ICT as a new "social instrument". To this end, ICT strategies must be linked to community social policy;

1.33   **favours** the creation of libraries and pictorial museums of digital content on the historical and cultural heritage with general access for all;

1.34   **supports** the promotion of the digital dialogue (e-consultancy) with the aim of exchanging proposals, views, ideas, comments and best practices among countries, regions and more generally civil society.

2.   **Recommendations of the Committee of the Regions**

The Committee of the Regions

2.1   **proposes** that the Commission and the Member States attach special importance and high priority to the decentralisation of the management of:

- policies
- action programmes
- financial resources

to the local and regional authorities on i2010 matters, so that infrastructure and services are set up to improve the development and quality of life of citizens in the regions;

2.2   **recommends** that the Commission promote the formulation and application of indicators for comparative representation and evaluation of the regional distribution and use of ITC, to provide a continuous source of conclusions which would be useful and necessary for adopting measures to bring about socio-economic and technological convergence between the regions;

2.3   **wishes** to be informed of the results and conclusions of the interim evaluation report on the i2010 strategy, which should be made known in good time, and to give its views on them;

2.4   **recommends** that the Commission, when planning the action programmes, take account of the fact that a large part of the sector's development derives from the computer games industry and that great emphasis should therefore be placed on the quality of this development and the effects which it has on society and the younger generation in particular;

2.5   **asks** the Commission to involve the CoR fully in initiatives which may be organised to revise or adapt the agreed strategy once it has been implemented;

2.6   **informs** the Commission of its intention to make additional approaches to the Member States to encourage them to give effective support to the i2010 initiative and to adapt their national reform programmes, including those on ITC, with the primary objective of strengthening their

regions, in particular remote the outermost and rural regions and island communities who can best benefit from the socio-economic benefits of developing ICT;

2.7   **suggests** that the Commission pay special attention to the less economically developed regions, so that they can make use of the opportunities for effective convergence offered by ICT, and can avoid the risks of exclusion which ICT creates for those who do not have access to them.

In conclusion, the Committee of the Regions **emphasises and considers** that it is necessary to broaden and maintain an unhindered and continuous dialogue on the strategy "i2010 – A European Information Society for Growth and Employment". This is made necessary by the speed of technological developments and the needs to which they constantly give rise.

Brussels, 16 February 2006

The President	The Secretary-General
of the	of the
Committee of the Regions	Committee of the Regions

Michel Delebarre   Gerhard Stahl

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