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SPEECH

"eInclusion in Europe"

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Towards on Inclusive Information Society in Europe
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Minister Verelis, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The first thing I would like to do is to thank the Greek Presidency for organising this workshop which addresses the important topic of " eInclusion in the Information Society ".

This workshop comes at a very timely moment, when in Europe we are addressing key technical issues, like Broadband, 3G Mobile Telephony, Digital Television and the development of many important applications and infrastructures like eBusiness, eGovernment, eEducation, eHealth and also when we are concerned about issues like Trust and Security, efficiency and availability.

We are indeed busy with these matters under the eEurope action plan and we are working on these matters for **all citizens in Europe**. **Inclusion** is a key element in the success of our activities and **Accessibility** is one very essential part of it.

This year is the **European Year of People with Disabilities** and the awareness raised by this year should help us to focus attention on the fact that people with disabilities should be able to enjoy the Information Society as well as any other citizen in Europe.

ICT (Information & Communication Technologies) **plays a key role in the daily activities of any person**. Whether related to employment, education, leisure, or at home, ICT is present in some form or another: in computers, in telephones and in TV equipment. With the development of technology and the convergence of new platforms, these devices will play an increasingly important role in our daily lives because many new and complex services are being offered through them. **Access** for people with disabilities to the Information Society is crucial for their integration and participation and their development as citizens with equal rights.

However we are confronted with a reality that is still far from being perfect.

- People with disabilities experience significant problems when accessing telecommunications Services in Europe. For example, it is not easy for a deaf person to make a phonecall from one country to another in the European Union. This could be due to the involvement of different call centres, different regulations, different subsidies and even different technologies.
- People with disabilities find themselves at a disadvantage compared to other citizens as far as access to telecommunications services is concerned. Disadvantages stem from the number of accessible services available, their quality and their price.
- A person with reduced upper limb mobility using a computer to communicate or send e-mail very often needs considerably more time online than other citizens. The natural consequence of this is a bigger telephone bill.

Although the need to have appropriate equipment at affordable prices is obvious, it is difficult to find special terminals that can be connected to assistive technologies and where they exist, they are usually rather expensive.

People with disabilities and older citizens have difficulties in accessing tele-services, for example phone banking or tele-shopping. Tele-services are often not accessible to clients with disabilities because of a lack of flexibility in their user interfaces which require simultaneous visual, aural and dextrous competence.

The **European legislation** in the area of ICT mentions the issue of accessibility for persons with disability in several Directives but the full potential of these documents to improve the current situation has not yet been realised. We now have the opportunity and the commitment to improve the situation in Europe. As new ICT technologies arrive and new legislation is developed, there is a considerable risk of creating additional barriers if accessibility by persons with disabilities is not considered. In particular

ensuring access to new mobile communications and to new **digital television services** is a big challenge ahead of us.

It is also very important to ensure that ongoing work on data protection copyright and electronic signature takes into account the needs of people with disabilities. In order to make documents available for blind people, it might be necessary to modify formats and enrich them with additional information.

In the USA this is being achieved through on one hand specific legislation that **"prohibits discrimination and ensures equal employment opportunity for persons with disabilities, in state and local government services, public accommodations, commercial facilities, and transportation"**, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). But this basic legislation has been complemented by The Rehabilitation Act and in particular Section 508: **"The law applies to all Federal agencies when they develop, procure, maintain, or use electronic and information technology. Under Section 508 (29 U.S.C. 794d), agencies must give disabled employees and members of the public access to information that is comparable to the access available to others..."**. And the US government is the largest purchaser of ICT products and services in the world..!

Section 508 not only has a strong impact on US industry, but it also affects European industry. A well-known European manufacturer of mobile telephones and ICT equipment recognised in a recent Design for All workshop, that the main reason for them to consider accessibility in their products and organising their labs accordingly, was section 508.

Following this model, one path to explore is the support of accessibility through public procurement. Clear directives addressing accessibility, complemented by public procurement supported by technical standards would certainly have a positive impact on the European market and improve accessibility

We have started to work towards this goal through the **eEurope 2002 Action Plan** and we are trying to continue to improve the accessibility to the Information Society through the new **eEurope 2005 Action Plan**. Whereas **eEurope 2002** had a set of specific vertical action lines devoted specifically to people with disabilities, **in eEurope 2005** we have adopted a horizontal approach including **accessibility in each of the chapters**.

The targets that we set for 2002 have largely been achieved but this does not mean that the work is finished. In some cases this means that the core of the work has started and it needs to be carried out and monitored. In others a certain momentum has been generated in this matter leading to the creation of sustainable infrastructures which will continue to develop the necessary activities in this field. Before I go into more detail into the plans of 2005, I would like to give you some examples of the results obtained in four of the targets I mentioned in eEurope 2002:

The first target in the chapter called **"Participation for All in the Knowledge-based Economy"** was a review of relevant legislation to assess conformity to accessibility principles. Last month we launched a working group under the **Communication Committee**. This group is going to use the possibilities under the Framework Directive in order to **improve access to Communication for people with disabilities**. The purpose of this group is:

- To encourage network operators and terminal equipment manufacturers to cooperate in order to facilitate access to electronic communication services by users with disabilities
- To raise and spread awareness of the constraints experienced by people with various disabilities in gaining access to and using electronic communication services
- To suggest ways of overcoming these constraints and to share experience and good practice identified at national, regional or at local level

The group had its first meeting the 31st of March and will produce its first results at the end of this year.

Another target was the publication of the **Design for All and Assistive Technology Standards** in Europe, with a view to improving employability and social inclusion. Here a co-ordination group, reporting directly to the board of European Standardisation organisations was set up. This group is deciding and setting priorities on the development of Assistive technologies and Design for All standards. The group also promotes the knowledge, awareness and use of Design for All guidelines and tools by the market players and within standardisation organisations. The guiding principle is "**Mainstreaming Accessibility**" in all areas of standardisation activities and considering the needs of older persons and people with disabilities when performing standardisation work by using these guidelines.

The target of the adoption of the **Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) guidelines** for public websites has received considerable attention. This is a good example of an activity where we can say that the work is just starting. All the Member States and European Institutions have already agreed to adopt at various levels the **WAI** guidelines for their public sites as proposed by the Commission in the Communication "**eEurope: accessibility of public web sites and their content**". This Communication was roundly supported by the Council and the Parliament as reflected in their Resolutions. But it is only now that implementation is starting!

Accessibility of public websites is a key element of e-Government, e-Health and e-Learning. Accessible websites are essential if we want to bring these services to all citizens including of course to citizens with disabilities. Now public organisations are starting with the work. They are creating awareness amongst the employees and they are also assessing the problem of "**...how accessible are our sites?**" They are training their web masters in the use of the **WAI** guidelines, they are buying appropriate authoring tools which include accessibility features, they are including web accessibility in their public procurement calls, they are implementing mechanisms for testing, evaluating and repairing web sites, they are monitoring and benchmarking progress on the accessibility of the public sites, and they are channelling user feedback. As you can see there is plenty of work ahead of us. We plan to report regularly on the progress made on this target.

The last target I would like to mention is the establishment and networking of **the National Centres of Excellence in Design** and the creation of recommendations for a **European Curriculum** for designers and engineers. The Network of Centres of Excellence in Design for All was launched in July 2002 and comprises over 100 members from all Member States. The network has a European Secretariat that will rotate under the Member States Centres. My services are now working with the Network on the preparation of the recommendations for the curriculum which is expected this year.

In this network there are organisations from many backgrounds: industry, research institutes, user groups, rehabilitation centres and of course educational centres and universities. These universities are forming our future professionals of the Information Society. Raising awareness amongst the students and providing them with knowledge and tools that will permit them to build a more accessible Information Society is an investment in the future. It is an investment that some universities are already making but there is room to extend this practice further. This activity is included within the work planned for **eEurope 2005**. and the work is ongoing!

There is, a clear political will in Europe to continue to improve accessibility to the Information Society. In the conclusions of the Vitoria Informal Telecom Council last year, it was stated that " **...accessibility to all kinds of electronic services provided by any means, including those based on Broadband internet access, 3G mobile communications or Digital TV should be ensured for people with disabilities and for older persons...** ".

The recently launched **eEurope 2005 Action Plan** adopted by the Seville Council of 21-22 June 2002, stated that "...**eEurope contains measures regarding eInclusion in all action lines...**" and it makes specific reference to the role of access for all citizens to online public services, to TV and to mobile phones. This action plan addresses amongst other areas: Broadband access, spectrum policies and multiplatform content.

The **eInclusion** activities under **eEurope 2005** have two main objectives: **firstly**, to carry out the statement of the **eEurope 2005 Action** adopted in Seville and **secondly**, to further implement and consolidate the activities generated from the targets of eEurope 2002 on eAccessibility.

Due to the truly horizontal character of eInclusion many of the actions proposed here will deal with several of the chapters of the **eEurope 2005 Action Plan**.

To co-ordinate and develop this area it is essential to have the support and co-operation of the Member states experts working closely together with the eEurope steering group for the duration of **eEurope 2005**.

Actions are needed in order to include **Accessibility to the various policy measures mentioned in eEurope 2005**. This could be achieved through the development of action plans to ensure eAccessibility to modern online public services like: eGovernment, eHealth and eLearning.

One way of addressing accessibility to those services is through the use of **Public Procurement. The actual Directive permits the use of social considerations like : "accessibility", in their tenders. This could be supported by** developing examples of harmonised models in Europe for accessibility criteria in Public Procurement. They could include a toolkit with test cases for purchasing accessible electronic educational material, public internet access points, website construction, authoring tools and other services.

A way to **empower people with disabilities** could be the creation of an accessibility ombudsman function including information points to collect accessibility concerns and propose a process for implementing solutions. This would be complemented by the participation of people with disabilities as consumers in the eEurope 2005 steering group.

Of course I have already mentioned the creation of a working group to improve **Telecom accessibility** in the Member states. In this group there is participation of the National Regulatory Authorities, the industry and Telecom operators and also direct participation of people with disabilities. The final aim would be to achieve truly European accessible networks, services and terminals.

Of course all the activities mentioned hitherto in support of accessibility under **eEurope 2005** are strongly supported by our **research and development work and by the standardisation activities**. In particular, future calls for proposals under the 6th Framework Programme will promote research and pre-standardisation on accessibility issues within the development of new alternative access platforms, such as digital television or 3G mobile systems, and in support of related policies in order to facilitate **eInclusion**.

Finally let me refer in particular to the specific plans for European research on accessibility.

It is based strongly upon the new concept of the **European Research Area ERA**, where the new instruments are encouraged to embrace a more flexible, integrated and agile European structure. The research themes and programmes are selected to support key policy issues in Europe and accessibility and inclusion is one of them. Within the Information Society Technologies thematic programme, Community actions will concentrate on key technological priorities among others related to inclusion and accessibility.

As it has been agreed, the preparation of this programme acknowledges the challenge of **".. ambient intelligent systems offering access to the Information Society for all, regardless of age and situation, as well as interactive and intelligent systems for health, mobility, security, leisure, tourism, and preservation of and access to the cultural heritage and environment..."**.

Here the **"eAccessibility for All"** concept adopts a holistic, multi-disciplinary approach, focusing on the real-world needs and concerns of users in all aspects of their lives: eGovernment, eBusiness, eLearning, work, entertainment, transport, leisure, et cetera. These will be made accessible to **All citizens**.

The intention is to further develop this theme within two inter-related areas of research and technological development work to be pursued in parallel: **'Barrier-free Technologies'** and **'Empowering Technologies'**.

Barrier-free technologies focus on mainstream Information Society products and systems, including public services, which must be designed in such a way that they can meet the requirements of the widest possible range of users and use situations.

Empowering technologies focus on a broad range of intelligent assistive devices and systems for persons with disabilities, which must be developed and improved. Leading-edge technologies must be identified and harnessed to the tasks of enabling users to live independent lives, to achieve self-fulfilment and to realise their full potential.

The first call for proposals in this area is expected to be launched in June of this year and the first contracts are expected to be finalised at the end of the year.

These projects together with the activities that we are carrying out under the **eEurope** umbrella will contribute to the full participation in and equal access to the Information Society for people with disabilities to the Information Society.

The European Commission has the commitment and intention to take into account the needs of persons with disabilities when developing the European contribution to the Information Society. This Workshop is an excellent forum for fertile co-operation and for the exchange of information in these areas. In particular it provides an opportunity to channel your comments and contributions for our future work **under eEurope accessibility activities**.

I encourage you to provide us with your conclusions and with your recommendations so that we are able to build together an **Inclusive European Information society**.

I wish you a fruitful Workshop and I thank you for your attention.