MINISTERIAL DECLARATION

Brussels, 29-30 November 2001

Ministers of EU Member States, EFTA and countries in accession negotiations with the EU met on 29th November 2001 in the framework of the *e*Government conference organised jointly by the European Commission and the Belgian Presidency of the Council.

On this occasion, Ministers re-affirmed their commitments to rapid *e*Government developments as an integral part of the Lisbon strategy for growth and employment and of the *e*Europe Action Plan. Ministers welcomed the joint efforts by the countries in accession negotiations on the *e*Europe+ Action Plan, and declared willingness to work together in modernising their administrations.

Ministers recalled the Resolution of European Ministers of Public Service and Administration[1] and the report of the Conference on "*e*Government in the service of citizens and enterprises"[2], and agreed that higher priority should be given to *e*Government issues in further development of the Lisbon Strategy.

Ensuring inclusion

Ministers agreed that citizens and businesses must be at the centre of attention in the design of on-line services which can be easily accessible by all. Ministers took note of the « e-Inclusion » report[3], and agreed that greater account must be taken of specific needs, for example of the physically disabled and for different age and language groups.

Ministers agreed that services must be delivered through several complementary communication channels: on-line[4] and in traditional ways, with continued opportunities for direct human contact and assistance where necessary. Citizens must be able to exercise choice in the channel they use. The ministers expressed concern about dependence on single ICT service-providers and producers, and called for more competition. Ministers agreed to share experiences, and asked the Commission to stimulate the development of open-source alternatives where necessary. Inter-operability of a variety of network infrastructures and services will therefore be essential, and open standards and "technology-neutral" regulation are vital.

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[1] In Strasbourg on 7 November 2000

[2] IDA-conference "eGovernment in the service of European citizens and enterprises-what is required at the European level" in Sandhamn organised by the Swedish Presidency and Comission on 13-14th June 2001.

[3] e-Inclusion" report of the High-level Group on Employment and the Social dimension of the Information Society (ESDIS), and the Council Resolution of 8th October 2001.

[4] For example : PC-telephone-line or cable-modem ; GPRS or 3G mobile wireless access ; iDTV etc

Promoting trust and security

Ministers recognised that appropriate security and trust is a precondition to the successful introduction of on-line *e*Government services. Ministers agreed to strengthen co-operation across Europe to ensure the security of networks and guarantee safe access to *e*Government services: In the delivery of electronic public services, including respect for privacy and safety, Ministers invited the Commission to establish a group of national experts to survey national electronic identification and authentication systems and tools, and to explore the possibilities for measures to promote policy coherence in these areas at the European Union level, and that this work will be reviewed by Ministers in 2003.   Ministers also looked forward to progress in this area at the forthcoming Telecommunications Council[5] and agreed to encourage the large-scale use of electronic signatures, when appropriate, for both public services and business by 2003.

Building on best practice

Ministers agreed that effective eGovernment requires internal re-organisation: changes in structures and work organisation, training and skills, as well as in employment conditions. Ministers agreed to share experience in training, and in improving the quality of work and working conditions in the public sector.

Ministers took note of the good practices identified and presented at the conference and agreed to explore further how best to extend them within their countries, across Europe and internationally. Ministers invited the Commission to further refine assessment methodologies.

Ministers acknowledged that information and communication technologies (ICT) provide unprecedented opportunities for easier access to authenticated public-sector information, and that clearer conditions for re-using it throughout Europe will contribute to economic growth and employment. Ministers agreed to give urgent attention to the proposals by the European Commission in this area[6]. They agreed that special attention should be given to access to information from the EU Institutions**.**

Ministers agreed to encourage National Administrations and EU Institutions to establish a common view on which pan-European *e*Services are most essential on a European level, and to establishment of an *e*Government platform, building on the European Forum on *e*Government and the *e*Government Observatory[7].

Ministers invited Governments of Countries outside Europe, both developed and developing, to participate in the exchange of good practices with Europe.

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[5] The Council on the 7th December 2001

[6] Commission Communication on Creating an EU Framework for the expoitation of Public-Sector Information (COM(2001)607final) : 23 October 2001

[7] Supported by the IDA programme.

Encouraging participation

Ministers agreed that ICT can be a powerful tool for good governance and endorsed five key principles[8]: Openness; participation; accountability; effectiveness; and coherence. Ministers recognised that the transition to *e*Government must improve all these dimensions, and invited the European Institutions to implement eGovernment solutions accordingly.

Ministers recognised that ICT can contribute to greater participation in democratic activities and can strengthen our systems of representative parliamentary democracy. They took note of the new opportunities and challenges associated with ICT and Parliamentary democracy in Europe[9], and recognised the importance of increasing participation in local, regional, national and European democratic processes. Ministers agreed to explore, initially at national-level, with MEPs and others, how use of ICT could help to increase awareness, interest and participation in European democratic processes, in particular in the European parliamentary elections in 2004. Ministers also recognised that ICT offers important new opportunities for "e-community" development and agreed to catalyse and support these developments.

Looking to the future

Ministers recognised that the transformations towards *e*Government must go beyond the first generation of Internet-based provision of information to fully interactive services. Ministers invited the European Commission to make the necessary investments in research and technological development, in particular in the sixth Framework Programme, to ensure interoperability and dependability in the next generations of infrastructures[10] and open systems. Ministers also stressed the need for prioritisation, evaluation and co-ordination of EU *e*Government initiatives[11]. and invited the Commission to ensure greater synergy between *e*Government activities under the responsibility of different services.

Ministers agreed that a dynamic and democratic European society, with a strong and productive economy, requires service-oriented, reliable and innovative government, at all levels. Successful implementation of *e*Government can improve services, strengthen our societies, increase productivity and welfare, and reinforce democracy. Ministers reiterated their commitment to pursuing a long-term vision, with clear and monitorable objectives, and with constancy.

Ministers agreed to request the President of the Council to bring the results of the conference, and in particular the Ministerial Declaration, to the attention of the Heads of State and Heads of Government in their forthcoming meetings.

Ministers welcomed the invitation of the Italian Government to take stock of future eGovernment developments in a Conference in Italy in July 2003, and took note of the plans for UN World summit on the Information society in Geneva in December 2003.

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[8] COM(2001)428 of 25.7.2001

[9] Statement from the meeting of European Parliamentary Delegations in Helsinki and Tallin in September 2001

[10] Including a fast but coherent transition to broadband access and the next Internet Protocol.

[11] In the frameworks of Trans-European Communications Networks, the IDA, *e*Content and *e*Learning programmes, and in the areas of Regional development ; Employment and social Affairs; Research; Information Society; Education and culture, and Enterprise.