

# EEA Consultative Committee

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Brussels

## RESOLUTION

on

## eEUROPE

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Rapporteurs:

Filip **HAMRO-DROTZ** (EU-ESC, Finland/Employers)

Sissel **MONSVOLD** (EFTA-CC, Norway/Employers)

Assisting Co-rapporteur:

Davíð **STEFÁNSSON** (EFTA-CC, Iceland/Employers)

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## 1. BACKGROUND

1.1 The Consultative Committee of the European Economic Area (EEA-CC) is composed of representatives of the key socio-economic interest groups in the eighteen EEA Member States. The Committee acts as spokesman for workers, employers and categories reflecting various interests in these countries and forms a part of the EEA institutional set-up.

1.2 The following resolution on eEurope was adopted at the 9<sup>th</sup> meeting of the EEA-CC in Malmö on 22-23 May 2001. The rapporteurs were Mr. Filip HAMRO-DROTZ from the European Economic and Social Committee and Ms. Sissel MONSVOLD from the EFTA Consultative Committee. Assisting co-rapporteur was Mr. Davíd STEFÁNSSON from the EFTA Consultative Committee.

## 2. THE eEUROPE INITIATIVE

2.1 The eEurope initiative was launched in December 1999 by the European Commission. Complementary to this, the Commission also presented a Communication on "Job Strategies in the Information Society" in January 2000.

2.2 Following a positive reception for eEurope from Member States, the European Parliament and key European actors, the Commission submitted a progress report to the Lisbon European Council in March 2000. The Summit set the ambitious objective for **Europe to become the most competitive and dynamic economy in the world**. It recognised an urgent need for Europe to quickly exploit the opportunities of **the new economy** and in particular **the information and communication technologies (ICT), including Internet**.

2.3 To achieve this, the Heads of State and Government invited the Council and the Commission to draw up "... a comprehensive eEurope Action Plan ... using an open method of coordination, based on the benchmarking of national initiatives ...".

2.4 The Commission submitted its Action Plan "eEurope 2002 – an information society for all" in May 2000. The Action Plan was adopted by the Summit in Santa Maria da Feira in June 2000, which requested the Plan to be implemented before the end of 2002. It also requested that long-term outlines for the development of the knowledge-based economy, including improved access to information technology and softening the digital divide, should be prepared.

2.5 A progress report, prepared by the Commission was noted by the Nice Summit in December 2000.

2.6 The Stockholm Summit in March 2001 noted the results of the first benchmarking activities and other actions taken in line with the tabled programme. The Commission also presented the Communication "eEurope 2002 – Impact and Priorities", whose recommendations for the next steps to be taken were adopted. The Summit in Gothenburg in June 2001 will revert to the topic.

## 3. THE CORE OF THE eEUROPE ACTION PLAN

3.1 By introducing the eEurope initiative, the Commission and the EU Member States have recognised that neither the market forces, nor existing public policies and regulatory frameworks, favour sufficiently rapid development of Internet use in Europe. All the products and services are available, but demand is insufficient. The eEurope Action Plan reinforces and complements the action of market forces by:

- promoting Internet use and demand;
- investing in people and skills;
- facilitating access to a cheaper, more secure and faster Internet (focusing on telecoms charges and security).

3.2 There are three main methods by which the eEurope targets will be achieved: accelerating the setting up of an appropriate legal environment; supporting new infrastructure and services across Europe; applying the open method of co-ordination and benchmarking.

#### **4. IMPACT AND PRIORITIES**

4.1 The Commission's report to the Stockholm Summit included the results from three benchmarking studies as regards the three aspects noted in point 3.1.

4.2 The benchmarking consists of extensive data collection from the Member States, based on indicators which have been agreed upon between the members. Assessment of the impact of ICT on product markets, on employment and on society as a whole is undertaken continuously.

4.3 The Commission tabled several proposals on how to go further. They concerned actions in the fields of e-Commerce, e-Inclusion, e-Government, networks security, mobile communications, co-ordination to facilitate the introduction of digital television services with Internet capabilities, as well as promotion of interoperability.

4.4 The Commission moreover proposed several actions under the headings eLearning and eSkills: the training of teachers, adaptation of school curricula, research and promotion of life-long-learning.

4.5 Also the candidate countries will be involved in the efforts (eEurope+). The proposals by the candidate countries will be examined at the Gothenburg Summit in June 2001.

#### **5. OTHER ACTIONS**

5.1 The Foreign Ministers of the EU and other relevant countries welcomed in the beginning of April 2001 the proposal to develop a "Northern eDimension Action Plan" (NeDAP), launched by the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) in close cooperation with the Commission. It will be adopted in September 2001.

5.2 The association for European industry and employers (UNICE) has recently published its own benchmarking report "The reNewed Economy – business for a dynamic Europe". It is to be seen as a most welcomed and important contribution about core elements for the creation of a stable knowledge-based economy and society in Europe.

5.3 The European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) has underlined the importance of innovation and new information technologies as an instrument for social inclusion by making these technologies available to everyone. ETUC has moreover emphasized that proper education systems and access to lifelong learning must be ensured in connection with increased use of information technologies.

5.4 The European Centre of Enterprises with public participation and of Enterprises of general economic interest (CEEP) has welcomed the eEurope Action Plan but has also pointed out that it must be complemented by an effective review of the regulatory environment. The CEEP has committed itself to assist the European Commission in achieving the objectives of the eEurope initiative, in particular its *Government online* goals.

5.5 EuroCommerce is also a key player in the evolution of the e-marketplace and has taken a lead in developing self-regulation measures for e-commerce, designed to build consumer confidence and safeguard consumer rights. The aim is to have a system up and running by early 2002.

5.6 The OECD has during two years studied the new economy and the origin for growth. Policy outlines about the knowledge-based economy and society will be adopted by the OECD Ministerial Council in May 2001. The recommendations will be of core importance for further efforts in this field.

## **6. EEA EFTA PARTICIPATION IN eEUROPE**

6.1 The EEA EFTA States have underlined the importance of following up eEurope and have expressed their support to this initiative. In March 2000, EEA EFTA comments on eEurope were submitted to the EU, and at the EEA Council meeting on 19 September 2000 the EEA EFTA States expressed their interest and willingness to become involved in the eEurope Action Plan.

6.2 The EEA EFTA States have also followed the eEurope initiative and Information Society issues at national level: Norway has developed its own eNorway Action Plan; in Iceland, the government has set out its "Vision of the Information Society", as well as a "Project Plan for the Development of e-Commerce and e-Government"; and Liechtenstein has developed a special "eLiechtenstein Plan".

6.3 The eEurope Action Plan can be divided into two parts: legislation and non-binding measures. Most of the proposed legislation in the Action Plan is EEA relevant and will be incorporated into the EEA Agreement through the usual EEA procedures. However, most of the non-binding measures in the eEurope Action Plan fall outside the scope of the EEA Agreement, with the exception of actions supported by programmes in which the EEA EFTA States participate.

## **7. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

7.1 The EEA-CC welcomes the eEurope initiative and considers it to be the most important and ambitious effort by the EU to date to familiarise its citizens with and adapt its businesses and its public bodies as rapidly as possible to the new conditions created by the digital age and the new economy.

7.2 The EEA-CC agrees with the broad approach of the eEurope initiative, which aims at structural changes in the economy, coordination in technology and legislation, strong innovation and adaptation in education and work organisation, as well as investment in human capital.

7.3 The EEA-CC notes the great relevance of the eEurope Action Plan in order to achieve the goal for Europe "to become the most competitive and dynamic economy in the world". The Committee believes that, under certain conditions, the plan could be a genuine help *inter alia* in enabling Europe to play a leading role in shaping the new global economic reality of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

7.4 The EEA-CC considers the eEurope Action Plan to be relevant for and of greatest importance to all the EEA States. They should therefore create a fully-fledged cooperation between them, based on the existing outlines, in order to achieve common goals. It is, in this context, of particular importance that benchmarking exercises include all the EEA countries.

7.5 In those cases where the EEA EFTA States participate through EU programmes in the measures under the eEurope Action Plan, it is important to make sure that they take part in all the activities carried out – in particular in benchmarking exercises and in individual studies financed through the programmes.

7.6 The EEA-CC calls on the EEA EFTA States to follow closely all measures and actions undertaken by the EU Member States in the context of the eEurope initiative, not only legislative initiatives covered by the EEA Agreement.

7.7 The EEA-CC requests the EEA Council to address without delay eEurope as a priority topic for close cooperation, aiming at operative conclusions.

7.8 The EEA-CC is willing to give its contribution to this topic and will, when appropriate, revert with recommendations in specific areas.