THE PRESIDENT

OF ROMANIA

STATEMENT

by Mr. ION ILIESCU, President of Romania,

at the Meeting of the Preparatory Committee

for the World Summit on the Information Society

- Geneva, 17 February 2003 -

Distinguished Members of the Committee,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am pleased to see that the preparations for the World Summit on the Information Society, an initiative of the International Telecommunications Union, have entered a new phase. We are now in a position to evaluate the results of several regional ministerial conferences, including the all-European one that was held in Bucharest from 7 to 9 November 2002.

At the Conference in Bucharest, which was attended by over 1,200 delegates, a considerable concerted effort was made at an all-European level clearly to define the concept of Information Society, the phases of transition to it, the actions required in the legal, institutional and administrative spheres to structure public-private partnerships, and the criteria for the evaluation of the

successful completion of the project. At the same time, the debate highlighted the means and tools for political, economic, social and cultural action toward building the Information Society and the new, knowledge-based economy.

The Bucharest meeting emphasized how important and necessary it was to make sure that the actions and efforts of all stakeholders were coordinated in a coherent manner by harmonizing specific approaches at national and regional levels in accordance with a converging political blueprint that enjoyed the support of governments and was to be implemented on the basis of a Global Action Plan.

A world summit devoted to the information society has become necessary also because, despite the Internet boom, the revolution in the sphere of computer science and telecommunications is still in its early days. It is expected that, in the next few decades, the Internet and its associated technologies will further change our lives not only in terms of economic development and human relationships but also in the realm of politics by making it possible to move from representative democracy to direct democracy.

Considering the high pace of developments in information science and its applications, it makes sense to give a thought to the contrast between this emerging reality and the content of the "Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace", which John Perry Barlow posted online in 1996: *"Governments of the industrial World, you weary giants of flesh and steel, I come from cyberspace, the new home of mind. On behalf of the future, I ask you of the past to leave us alone. You are not welcome among us. You have no sovereignty where we gather!"*

No man is a prophet in his own land! Only five years after Barlow's manifesto, we all realized that we were involved in an endeavour from which no-one could be excluded. Governments still have an important part to play; they are natural and unavoidable partners for both the industrial-financial private sector and the public services. The role of governments becomes

essential when it comes to regulation, to providing the requisite conditions for fair competition, to shouldering the inherent costs of ensuring equal access of citizens to new technologies, and to protecting privacy and safeguarding citizens from excessive, indiscriminate use of digital networks.

John Perry Barlow was also wrong in his assumption that the Internet would spawn a new economy, in opposition to the purportedly old one of the industrial world. That is still a far-away prospect. The emergence of the new economy only enhances the old one; it has not become a substitute for it. Such an exclusive approach. We may have started, at last, to learn from the lessons of the past, when we proved unable to agree on the uses of some important technologies, which eventually turned against us.

I share, however, the creed expressed at the end of the manifesto, since it voices a wish that we all hold in common: *"We will create a civilization of the mind in cyberspace. May it be more humane and fair."* We truly need a civilization of the mind, capable of turning to better account the huge human capital that still lies idle both in the industrial countries and, particularly, in the developing ones. That is the reason why we need to take action toward helping on the emergence and spread of the specific structures of knowledge-based economy.

We also need to build a more humane and fair world. More humane means more democratic, where the citizen's rights and liberties are widely spread and respected. More fairness is achieved through an increasingly equitable global distribution of wealth.

From that perspective, the Information Society provides, I would say, a unique opportunity for Romania to narrow, within an historically short period of time, the wide development gap that still separates it from the more advanced industrial countries.

The problem of development gaps has become a global one, and it requires global responses. We can no longer countenance a few islands of prosperity in a sea of poverty. It was not by

accident that the summits at Monterrey and Johannesburg in 2002 were devoted to such issues.

Social polarization, the rift between the rich and the poor, is now compounded by a "digital divide", the gap between those who have access to knowledge, information and good education and those who have not. The digital divide can even increase poverty unless meaningful action is taken.

Viewed in this light, the Information Society should actually speed up the progress of sustainable development on a global scale; it should help narrow the gap between the rich countries and the poor ones and should become an effective instrument for good governance.

Information Society is defined as a society of knowledge. Hence, the emphasis we in Romania place on education, especially for the young people. By 2004, we plan to equip Romanian schools with 500,000 more computers; we aim at a strong development of the software industry as one of the future engines of sustainable economic growth.

In order to make better use of the potential provided by the new technologies and by the Internet, we envisage the establishment of strong educational platforms, as mandatory instruments in the learning process. We also plan to develop a Virtual National Library.

Specific applications of the information science are also essential for the management of economic processes.

Since Romania is still confronted with a rather weak institutional capacity, red tape and corruption, we have introduced, during the past two years, some instruments for electronic governance in central and local administration, including electronic tenders for government procurement. The results are promising in terms of cost effectiveness and transparency.

The topics discussed at the all-European Conference in Bucharest focused on fields of priority interest and major concern. Concepts like e-government, e-regulation, e-learning, or

e-inclusion respond to the needs of modern society; they favour the advent of good governance, improved quality of life, preservation of cultural diversity and linguistic pluralism; they enhance individual creativity and the principle of equal opportunities.

In the process, we acquire the ability to define new models of interaction, in the spirit of good governance, between the main institutional actors: Government, Parliament, ministries, public services, private enterprise, the civil society, the mass media. Romania's rapid and positive progress bears testimony to the fact that we have the capability to attain ambitious goals such as those to be set at the World Summit on the Information Society, provided that those goals are clearly formulated and there is a firm will to engage in joint action.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As I also stated in my opening address to the Preparatory Conference in Bucharest, digital technologies by themselves cannot solve a nation's development problems, and they cannot be used as a universal panacea. They can only enhance positive phenomena and processes, provided they are used rationally, within open economic and political systems, to get maximum performance at optimum social costs. In other words, the Information Society is an eminently democratic one. On the other hand, democratic societies themselves essentially need to make sustained efforts to increase democratic access to information.

There is a direct link between development and democracy. For the past few years there has been talk about a crisis of representative democracy, some were tempted to attribute part of the blame to the new technologies, which allegedly encouraged the onset of a single cultural model and led to standard consumption patterns, thus reducing the citizen's own responsibility and relegating him to the status of a mere customer. This may be seen as empty half of the glass.

The full half of the glass consists in the fact that the Information Society structures allow for the development of new forms of social solidarity, community life, and direct democracy. We have an unprecedented opportunity to set up a democratic society at global level by spreading human rights and liberties worldwide and by establishing a planetary civil society.

Europe, which is now busy making itself whole again and building its own identity, is called upon to play a key role in this process thanks to the European social model, which combines the demands of economic development with the need for adequate social protection.

The social dimension is a decisive component of the Information Society; it calls for highly performing and widely accessible public and educational services, for a broad recruitment base of political, business and cultural elites, and for well-established social solidarity systems.

Many of the aspects that I have mentioned here can be found in the "National Strategy for the Advancement of the New Economy and of the Information Society", which was recently endorsed by the Romanian Government, following wide-ranging consultations with various stakeholders and an in-depth public debate. The Strategy has been developed with a view to Romania's accession to the European Union.

Now, I should like to bring up a topic that has not been so amply debated but is still directly related to the consequences of building an Information Society. The issue has two components. One concerns the dependence of post-industrial societies on technology and the vulnerabilities arising from this.

The Information Society will immensely increase our dependence on technology, and that is why it is logical and legitimate to build a legal framework and the implementation mechanisms that would enable us to defend ourselves against those who would seek to seize the opportunities afforded by high technology in order to attack the values underpinning the new

societal structures. The safety of information networks may become a critical issue in the near future.

Second point: if we seek to guarantee broad access to the new, web-like world economy and thus to narrow down development gaps, we also need to preserve the diversity and vigour of local cultures. The effects of destroying cultural diversity, which is the result of thousands of years of evolutionary growth, would be just as devastating for our common future as the loss of biological diversity.

The Information Society will have to be based on the ethics of science, civic responsibility, democracy, development, and peace. We cannot accept the transformation of the Internet, the communications networks, and the mass media into vehicles for the dissemination of hatred, religious fanaticism, xenophobia, and racism, or into instruments serving international terrorism and organized crime structures.

The age that we live in is not only the age of wider access to information, but also one of permanent search for rational balance between the demands of economic development and legitimate social needs. It is the age of restructuring our relationships with the world and with our fellow human beings, the age of enhanced participation in, and commitment to, the betterment of society by each and every one of us.

Thank you for your attention.