

SECOND PHASE OF WSIS, 16-18 NOVEMBER, TUNIS

STATEMENT BY MR. PLAMEN VATCHKOV, CHAIRMAN OF THE STATE AGENCY FOR INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AND COMMUNICATIONS OF THE REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA

Mr. President,

Mr. Secretary General,

Your Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

At the outset I would like to congratulate you Mr. President and the members of the Bureau for your responsible leadership, along with thanking all those who contributed to the substantial preparation and outcome of this unique Summit.

My delegation commends the excellent conditions provided to us by the Government and people of Tunisia. I would like to extend to them our warmest gratitude for their hospitality.

Mr. President,

It is an honor and pleasure for me to address on behalf of the Bulgarian Government this high level Second Phase of the UN Summit on Information Society, which plays a central role in defining a framework for the development of the Global Information Society in the 21st century. Bulgaria has aligned itself with the assessment on this Summit's outcome made yesterday by the UK Presidency of the European Union.

Mr. President,

The beginning of the new Millennium has seen an unprecedented transition from industrial to information society with the three sectors of telecommunications, information technologies and media functioning in ever closer synergy. This has enabled the development of new products and services and at the same time has had an enormous impact on key aspects of social life, such as education, health, media, public services and commerce. Information and communication technologies are rapidly changing life of modern society and communities. They are a fundamental factor of globalization and a driving force for economic growth and prosperity. They can serve as indispensable tool for speeding up the implementation of the UN Millennium Development Goals by 2015.

It is a regrettable fact that the majority of the world's population still has limited or no access to modern information and communication technologies and is deprived of the benefits of the Information Society. Although during the 90-ies the developing countries have made significant progress in building their information infrastructure, this cannot compensate for the existing "digital gap" between developed and developing countries. While the existing gap in fixed and mobile communications has narrowed, the digital divide in the construction of broadband networks and providing electronic services to citizens and businesses has grown wider both between the different countries and between the urban and the rural areas. Specific and dedicated efforts still need to be made by all of us for bridging the digital divide and building up an inclusive Information Society and knowledge-based global economy.

The Bulgarian Government has continuously supported the implementation of the Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action adopted at the First phase of the World Summit on the Information Society and premised on the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We fully share the Tunis commitment and the Agenda that will be adopted at this Summit. They sustain the vision of a Global Information Society based on solidarity, cooperation and inclusion and strengthen our confidence in a better world for our children. We appreciate the political will of all member countries to discuss openly and constructively topical issues related to the Information Society and to draw a collective strategy for the future. We believe that the Tunis agenda can serve as basis of a "win-win" strategy for all stakeholders in the process.

Mr. President,

Let me add a few words about the role and the place of Bulgaria in this process. During the last two years Bulgaria had its index of development of Information Society growing by 19% annually, which is two times higher as compared to previous years. This is primarily due to the considerable improvement of the availability of new technology and increased demand for IT skills. These factors led to significant rise of the introduction of personal computers in the country, especially in education and Internet usage by citizens and business. During the past year the percentage of Internet users reached more than 22%, e-education grew by 23%, and mobile subscribers saw a 10% uptake reaching about 50% of the population. In this regard I would like to emphasize the valuable support and know-how provided by the UNDP for the management of key projects in the ICT sector.

Development of Information and communication technologies is also a priority of the Bulgarian Government. We consider the establishment of a high-speed information infrastructure as one of the foundations of the knowledge-based economy that fosters economic development and improves standard of living of the people. Some of the goals that Bulgaria has achieved in the area of telecommunications are as follows:

- a completely liberalized telecommunications market where 22 licensed operators compete with the incumbent,
- 3 licensed mobile operators,
- 3 licensed UMTS operators,
- 5 licensed WiMAX operators,
- more than 40 % digitalization of the fixed telecommunication network, and
- 18% annual sustainable growth of the IT sector during the last 4 years.

The Bulgarian government has also put emphasis on the introduction of ICT in education by considerable investments in computer and communication infrastructure in more than 3200 schools around the country thus giving virtually all the students access to computer and Internet.

The expectations for growth of the Information Society in the next years are linked to the processes of convergence of various infrastructures, services and content, development of e-government, e-health, education and qualification, and increasing the competitiveness of Bulgarian business by use of new technology.

The Information Society development activities in Bulgaria are carried out in conformity with the world trends, the European Community policies and the national specific conditions. Our main challenges are related to full implementation of the EU Electronic Communications Regulatory Framework, the i2010 Initiative and, more specifically, the development of network and electronic services, adoption of ICT by businesses, strengthening the competitiveness, inclusion and development of public electronic services.

We look forward to the process of enhanced cooperation among governments, private sector, civil society and the relevant international institutions, for effective implementation of the agenda set forth by the Tunis Summit.

We stand ready to share our experience with other countries and to take advantage of this exchange.

Thank you for your attention.