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## **Internet for all: EU ministers commit to an inclusive and barrier-free information society**

***A pan-European drive to use information and communication technologies to help people to overcome economic, social, educational, territorial or disability-related disadvantages was endorsed by ministers of 34 European countries in Riga (Latvia) today. "e-Inclusion" targets include halving the gap in internet usage by groups at risk of exclusion, boosting broadband coverage in Europe to at least 90%, and making all public web sites accessible by 2010.***

Welcoming the ministers' undertaking, Information Society and Media Viviane Reding said: "Many Europeans still get too little benefit from information and communication technologies, and millions are at risk of being left behind. Enabling all Europeans to participate on equal terms in the information society is not only a social necessity – it is a huge economic opportunity for industry. By implementing their Riga undertakings, European countries will take a big step towards making e-inclusion a reality."

The Riga Ministerial Declaration, signed today by ministers from EU Member States, accession and candidate countries, and EFTA/EEA countries, sets out the following specific targets:

- halve the gap in internet usage by 2010 for groups at risk of exclusion, such as older people, people with disabilities, and unemployed persons,
- increase broadband coverage (i.e. the availability of broadband infrastructure) in Europe to at least 90% by 2010. In 2005, broadband was available to about 60% of businesses and households in the remote and rural areas of the EU15 and to more than 90% in the urban areas; see [IP/06/340](#)),
- ensure that all public websites are accessible by 2010,
- by 2008, put in place actions in the field of digital literacy and skills to reduce gaps for groups at risk of exclusion by half in 2010,
- by 2007, make recommendations on accessibility standards and common approaches, which could become mandatory in public procurement by 2010, and
- assess the necessity for legislative measures in the field of e-Accessibility, and take account of accessibility requirements in the review of the electronic communications regulatory framework beginning in June 2006.

Ministers also invited the Commission to address, as a matter of urgency, and before the end of 2006, the issues of active ageing and independent living in the information society.

The means to achieve these targets include measures to promote the take-up of user-recommended best practices, industry-led provision of accessible technology, innovative EU research, national e-inclusion plans, and voluntary agreements between stakeholders.

As information and communication technologies (ICT) become more pervasive in society and the economy, so their potential impact on everyday life grows.

Lack of affordability, access, accessibility, skills and motivation are all barriers for the estimated 30 to 40 percent of Europeans not benefiting from the information society. Despite broadband subscriptions in Europe growing by 60% in 2005 and overtaking the US for the first time, broadband penetration (or "take-up" – measured as the number of subscribers per 100 population) is still only at 13% of the EU population (or about 25% of households), with significant differences in access between rural and urban areas (see [IP/06/340](#)). This is why Commissioner Reding intends to intensify the application of EU telecom rules in the next years to enhance competition in the internal market and to achieve a broadband penetration of at least 50% of households by 2010.

In the EU, only 10% of persons over 65 use the Internet. Only around 3% of public web sites fully comply with minimum web accessibility standards – a real problem for the 15% of the EU population with disabilities. In real terms, this means that a huge percentage of the population in the EU cannot fully participate in and contribute to social and economic life. This undermines potentials for Europe's labour, goods and services markets. ICT-enabled job participation can help bring excluded groups into the job market and thus make a contribution towards Europe's 70% labour market participation target. Ministers in Riga therefore backed strongly the European Commission's intention to prepare for the European e-inclusion initiative announced for 2008 in the "i2010" strategy, the digital economy component of the EU's renewed "Lisbon" agenda for jobs and growth.

Commissioner Reding also stressed the need for public authorities at all levels, industry and users "to work together for a coherent and systematic approach towards an inclusive, barrier-free Information Society". The European Commission will mobilise all means to this end, including research initiatives under the EU's seventh Research Framework programme (FP7), innovation actions in the Competitiveness and Innovation Programme (CIP), the strict application of today's EU telecom rules to ensure effective competition and better, faster and richer services for citizens, as well as legislative measures where required.

See also [MEMO/06/237](#)