

**Report from Stability Pact eSEEurope
Second Working Group Meeting
Skopje, 29 March 2001**

Introduction

The Chair made a short introduction followed by a message by Mr Ljuben Talev of the host country Macedonia. It was appreciated that the delegates of the meeting had decided to participate despite the current difficulties faced by the country.

The Chair mentioned that since the first meeting in Zagreb in January 2001 that three sub-groups have been formed; eSEE-education, eSEE-government and eSEE-business. The three sub-groups have had Internet-based conferences thanks to Voice over IP in February and the homepage for the Initiative was activated for discussions for the three sub-groups earlier this month.

1) eSEE-government

With Sweden presently as rapporteur with the support of UK, Possible Elements of Draft Action Plan has been worked out by the sub-group eSEE-government. The main three objectives are:

- i) to increase Internet usage in the region,
- ii) to increase access to public services and information through the use of ICT
- iii) to improve government efficiency through the use of ICT.

Various measures by governments are suggested according to the enclosed Draft Action Plan (see annex 2).

Deregulation is important since competition is being fostered by good regulation. Croatia is a good example of government's effort to increase the access to public service through ICT. One theme which was highlighted is that government would introduce the rule that all procurement should be conducted electronically. The government would not consider bids which were not submitted electronically. This would enable certain governments to leapfrog and come in the forefront of the new technology.

It was mentioned that in Romania laws regarding e-signature and data protection have been adopted and other countries in the region are showing similar developments.

2) eSEE-education

The draft action plan for eSEE-education was presented by the rapporteur Mr Gerhard Kowar of Austria (see annex 3). The objectives are divided into four areas:

- i) to use the new technologies as a tool for ensuring life long learning policies at national level.
- ii) to counteract the skills gap caused by the discrepancies between the actual qualifications and the new profiles of qualifications required by new technologies
- iii) to promote social partnership to assist implementation of new technologies in the education and training systems
- iv) to disseminate experience and knowledge by means of networking in SEE

Several measures to meet the objectives have been suggested by the sub-group based on recommendations from SP Task Force on Education. The details are found in the enclosed Draft Action Plan.

It was mentioned countries which are not part of the region could gain from participating in the development of Draft Action Plans. These countries have also an educational system in transition and have to make way for the new technologies.

The UK (British Council) offered to get further involved in the work in this area, which was gratefully accepted.

3) eSEE-business

Information Technology can play an important role in strengthening the ability of the private sector to compete in both domestic and international markets. This is especially important as small and medium-sized (SMEs) in SEE increasingly compete with products and services from around the world. Encouraging an environment conducive to SME development must incorporate incentives for companies to utilize IT. Most importantly, this involves the deregulation of the telecom sector and promulgation of a regulatory framework. The paper on eSEE-business was, in the absence of US as rapporteur, presented by the Chair and the following concrete objectives were suggested:

- i) to create a Survey of International efforts/programs that focus on developing the IT market in South East Europe
- ii) to identify a country's IT comparative advantage
- iii) to encourage regional governments to support industry self-regulation
- iv) to adopt country actions plans to address regulatory issues
- v) to promote the enforcement of modern intellectual property rights laws, taking into account the Internet
- vi) to facilitate SMEs access to IT
- vii) to create a Portal for Regional SMEs

It was agreed that business will set the standard for Internet security. There are already many worthy projects in the field of e-business. It was stressed by the Chair that duplication should be avoided. It was mentioned that many SMEs are family based companies but that supporting the development of e-education does not exclude the support of SMEs getting access to IT.

The question was raised that the Working Group cannot simply recommend the governments to have IT-strategies without giving guidelines what steps to be taken. One solution could be that a certain country in the region is highlighted as a good example. That country's experiences and knowledge could be transferred to countries in process of forming a national IT-strategy.

There are several obstacles to overcome such as the ignorance visavi e-business. To train the leaders is one way to get high impact on a supportive action.

Examples of Projects which could be Pilote Projects for eSEEurope-Initiative

- SEE Digital Economy was presented by Macedonia through Mr Ljubomir Trajkovskis: The goals are among others to stimulate e-awareness and e-cooperation in SEE, to support SMEs and governments. More information on www.sofosnet.gr/seed
- South Eastern European Municipal Information Infrastructure , was presented by Macedonia through Mrs Mirjana Apostolova. The project stresses the importance of improving the quality of city services for the benefit of the citizens and the aim is an "e-City Hall without walls".The project has a regional connotation with municipalities involved throughout the region. More information on www.skopje.gov.mk
- Enterprise Support Agency (ESA) presented by Macedonia through Mr Gib Bulloch. ESA is focused on developing e-business on the ground. The project is involved in the steps leading to business start up including training, ebusiness planning and venture funding. There is a need for incubators which ESA would like to highlight, more information on www.esa-mk.com
- Academic and Research Networks in the Region was presented by Office of the High Representative, Bosnia Herzegovina through Mr Michael Weiner. There is the TEN –155 network in Europe and it is desirable if the SEEurope is hooked on to academic and research networks. These networks, some already activated, have great potential e.g. thousands of documents would be available on line, access to Open Universities on the Internet and cheap videoconferences every day. More information on www.biharnet.ba, www.dante.net/ten-155/ten155net.gif, www.carnet.hr, www.ceenet.org
- Telehouses
IT centres through out the region where SMEs, students, war-veterans and less fortunate persons could have access to Internet, PCs, printers etc. They could be run by government organisations, NGOs as well as the business communities.

eSEE-Business Network

The Chair and Co-chair have had discussions with the eSEE-Business Network in Zagreb on 21 March. Some conclusions of the discussions can be found in the enclosed document (annex 5). The business community stressed the importance to have a stable organisation for the work with ICT-strategies in each of the

governments in the region and a sound apolitical regulatory environment. Another strategic issue highlighted was the development of local ICT-market through co-operation with local partners to stem the brain-drain.

Objectives and Strategies

The whole Stability Pact work rests on ~~government~~ commitments by governments with the active involvement of the scociety at large, in particular the business community. The eSEEurope-Initiative is certainly not the only e-Initiative in this region and co-operation should be encouraged for example with SECI and with activities by e.g. the World Bank, the EBRD and the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe. The eSEEurope-Initiative must therefore present a clear value-added in comparison to existing activities. ~~The eSEEurope-Inititive must find the strategic mechanism in order to fullfill the objectives.-.~~

Participants noted that it will be important to keep in mind the objectives of the Initiative and to define concrete strategies to achieve them. It was suggested that the sub-groups should each highlight two or three key objectives and to define in detail the strategies and mechanisms to achieve the specific objectives.

Other comments

There was a general understanding that e-government also includes issues faced by the local governments.

Tentatively, a Stability Pact Regional Funding Conference is planned to be held in October 2001. The Conference will be organized jointly by the World Bank and the European Commission. ~~in co-operation with among others the World Bank, EU and Stability Pact.~~

Conclusions

- The work of the sub-groups has been endorsed in principle but the objectives and mechanisms for their implementation need to be further refined.
- After circulation a second cyberspace conference will be held on the revised text in mid April
- A draft of the Progress Report to be submitted to Working Table II at the Tirana Meeting on 22-23 May 2001 will be circulated for comments at the end of April.

The Chair thanked the Macedonian government for the excellent preparations of the meeting and the participants for their valuable contributions and declared the meeting ajourned..

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