

The role of BEREC & the development of ICT in the EU

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Honorable Minister, dear Colleagues from BEREC, EMERG, the Eastern Partnership and the European Commission, ladies and gentlemen,

Let me also welcome you to the sunny autumnal Athens. In the words of the poet:

“It's our pretty past, pretty present and the pretty future, it's to all coming generations the sea of love, the sea of beauty and the sea of pride. This is the pretty Mediterranean Sea, which lives in our hearts”.

This verse reflects the unifying factor of all our countries of the Euro-Mediterranean region. Our neighbourhood has been the birthplace of many important civilizations, hosts masterpieces of human creative genius, conserves numerous world cultural heritage sites, accommodates a diversity of religions, beliefs, ideas, living traditions and keeps on constantly creating artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance. Our region harbours a mix of industrial and service-oriented economies and comprises southern EU member states and neighbour countries from Northern Africa and the Middle East.

Our meeting brings together high government officials, heads of Regulatory Authorities, as well as senior representatives of the European Commission and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development.

It is in my view, the ideal panel for a fruitful discussion on how every stakeholder might contribute to the accelerated deployment of new communication technologies in the Mediterranean. I believe we all share the conviction that technology may well be a spark for growth, for job creation and for prosperity in our region. It is widely accepted that high speed networks can be a powerful tool for the provision of digital services, such as e-government, remote education, health care, entertainment, tourism and

other services capable of bridging the digital divide between developed and less developed regions or countries.

Unleashing the potential of the info-communications industry and spreading its benefits around all our countries requires firstly, a deep understanding of the digital ecosystem and its driving forces. This is characterised by user mobility, universal broadband coverage and increased data traffic. It requires significant investments to achieve ubiquitous communications, enabling the provision of seamless services across multiple networks and beyond national borders.

Secondly, boosting the digital economy in the region requires awareness and political support by all countries, which need to acknowledge and embrace the importance of broadband as a critical infrastructure.

In this direction, an effective regional cooperation through EMERG has to raise awareness and commitment of all national policy makers, ministries and regulators involved. This commitment could be reflected in us embracing the same principles and include them within a regional broadband plan, which will lay down the objectives, the resources and the plans for promoting ICT development in our neighbourhood. I am sure the European Commission and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development will be supportive of any such initiative, if it is to produce tangible results and measurable outcomes.

The role of BEREC

As part of this broader comprehensive partnership between Europe and the entire region, I am glad to present to you how BEREC, the Body of European Regulators for Electronic Communications, that I have the honour to chair, may act as an accelerator of ICT development in the EU and the Mediterranean area.

BEREC is composed of a Board of Regulators, assisted by an Office, which is a Community Body located in Riga, Latvia. Members of the board of regulators are heads or representatives of the NRAs established in each Member State with primary responsibility for overseeing the day-to-day operation of the national markets. Representatives from the European Commission, from NRAs in the European Economic Area and from EU candidate countries also participate as observers. As an independent body, BEREC's main role is to advise and assist the European Commission, the Parliament and the Council in developing the internal market by ensuring quality,

coherence and consistency of regulatory approaches on matters related to the electronic communications sector.

In this context, we have been constructively engaging with the EU institutions on the implementation of the European Regulatory Framework, providing high level expertise on important policy initiatives, such as the draft recommendation on cost accounting and non discrimination, the roaming regulation as well as the “Connected Continent” telecoms reform package.

The success of BEREC is an example of fruitful cooperation between regulators from different countries, with a great variety of networks, economic backgrounds and market dynamics with policy makers, as the European Commission. Our work is based on the conviction that regulation should provide stability, transparency, predictability and long term perspective for market actors and investors, while it also needs to be flexible, sense the pulse of the market and constantly adapt to changing circumstances.

In light of our experience, we at BEREC are well placed to recognize that regulators, whether in Europe, Africa or Middle East, essentially face similar challenges and opportunities.

In fact, many of the issues lying at the core of the BEREC work program, such as NGN, cost accounting methodologies, number portability, net neutrality and cross-border services have been addressed in various EMERG workshops.

Unlike BEREC, where our interaction is institutionalized and systematic, following an annual work program which derives from the European framework, EMERG is a more informal co-operation platform between telecommunications regulators of the Mediterranean area.

This is not surprising since notable differences between countries exist, as regards political regimes, cultural diversities, regulatory frameworks and market structures. These different conceptions are reflected into divergent regulatory approaches and enforcement powers of regulators, with varying degrees of independence from ministries and governments.

Despite those differences, there is a common understanding among all our countries, which is the necessity to boost the digital economy and ensure that all citizens, whether they reside in cities or in remote rural areas, enjoy basic broadband access,

with internet connectivity being an essential facility, equal to water, electricity or heating.

Under those circumstances, a coordination of national broadband policies is a key factor to address not only regional but ultimately global challenges.

In other words, we have no other option but to work together, so as to create unified operating conditions for operators and electronic communications' service providers and better serve our citizens and industries. From our perspective, greater harmonization, more transparency and predictability of the regulatory frameworks is required.

The way forward

How can this objective be achieved? Which concrete actions are necessary to approximate the operating rules of companies and businesses in the region? How can BEREC contribute to this goal?

In fact, BEREC is eager to share with EMERG our market intelligence and regulatory expertise in various fields, such as fixed and mobile broadband network deployment, market liberalization, access regulation, spectrum management, roaming, net neutrality, universal service and promotion of fair competition to the benefit of consumers and the entire economy.

To this end, we need to not just talk the talk but also walk the walk. More concretely, we have to learn from each other, embrace common principles and establish joint projects supported by adequate financing schemes, as part of a comprehensive medium-term southern Mediterranean strategy, with concrete deliverables and measurable objectives.

We are convinced that such harmonization will contribute to creating a level playing field between operators in all countries of the Mediterranean basin helping us increase our GDP and overcome our current economic challenges. Ensuring long term regulatory stability and predictability is a key factor to attract investment, promote cross-border services, and extract broader efficiencies for our economies and societies.

For instance, safeguarding the independence of regulators from national governments is crucial for a proper functioning of the market, as a result of the liberalization.

Moreover, establishing common guidelines for cooperation on licensing regimes, on retail price regulation, that has to be limited only to SMP operators and not on all operators, as the case is in some countries, are in our view vital steps to make markets more open and more competitive.

Enhancing the cooperation between the countries represented in EMERG and MENA countries can be an important step towards a broader unified business space for companies and potential investors.

On this basis, and within its capacity to promote consistent and harmonised regulation, BEREC has been and can continue being a strong supporter of the EMERG initiative. Several of our members already participate in EMERG activities and in fact play a leading role in disseminating regulatory best practices across the region.

Our cooperation and support to EMERG can be realised through a plan of targeted actions. These may include the organization of joint workshops in order to promote the exchange of knowledge in the South Mediterranean countries. The present high-level meeting may prove how effectively we can promote the already existing bilateral cooperation between us.

At an expert level, the joint workshop on “Enforcement and judicial review of NRAs decisions”, that will take place in Brussels on 2-3 December 2013, is another great example of the way that BEREC and EMERG can work together and learn from each other.

In my view, formalising our cooperation through a Memorandum of Understanding would certainly enhance the effectiveness of our joint actions. So I would invite you all to consider this possibility during the course of this meeting.

Let me conclude by inviting all of you, as sophisticated users of the new technologies, to transform the known acronym “www” meaning "world wide web" to different “www” this term signalling a "world without walls" for the entire Mediterranean basin!

Thank you for your attention.