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Keynote Speech by H. E. Dr. Vaira Vike-Freiberga, President of Latvia, at the opening session of the IST 2004 Conference, The Hague, the Netherlands, November 15th, 2004 (via videolink from Riga)

Mr. Chairman,
Honourable Ministers,
Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

[It is an honour and a pleasure for me to address this opening session of Europes most important Information Society Technologies event in the Hague.]

Speaking to you live from Riga, the capital city of Latvia, over 2000 kilometres away, may I start by expressing Latvias sincere thanks to the European Commission, the Government of the Netherlands and to all those who took part in the organization of this conference.

I shall start with the premise that, if used wisely and constructively, Information Society Technologies have the potential to enhance the prosperity, security and quality of life of people all over Europe, as well as in the rest of the world.

More specifically, the continued development of Europes IST sector is essential for the realization of the Lisbon Agenda 2000 to bring about economic, social and environmental renewal in the EU countries. The continued enhancement of innovation in the IST sphere must remain a priority to ensure Europes long-term economic growth and competitiveness.

This requires a three-pronged approach, starting with the assignment of a pre-determined minimum of the GDP by each of Europes national governments to science and research, along with the pooling of the resources of the EUs member states for research projects on a broader, European scale. Pan-European research projects should be more effective than single-country ventures, but they do require European nations to forge effective mechanisms for enhanced coordination and for joint priority-setting.

The second requirement for creating a pan-European knowledge society is technology transfer to economically viable applications. Investments in research should result at some point in the creation of new technological applications that can become instruments for wealth generation. Ideally, such applications should have an impact on all spheres of the economy, including public institutions, private enterprises large and small, as well as individual households. For technology transfer to be maximally effective, strengthened cooperation between academic researchers and industries is necessary, as well as flexible partnerships between government institutions and the private sector.

The third fundamental pillar of a knowledge society is education. Educational programmes and the training of manpower are necessary, first of all, to ensure a pool of qualified and talented researchers; secondly, to ensure a skilled workforce capable of manufacturing the necessary IST components and creating the attendant software; and thirdly, a computer-literate population that is able to take advantage of the technical resources that are being produced for the use of the public.

These three pillars of research, technology transfer and education will be essential for the creation of a genuine knowledge society and the raising of Europes global competitiveness. Europe will be able to play the global leadership role it seeks only if it can develop a common vision and mobilize its forces through an integrated strategy.

In the process, a goal-directed mobilization of the IST talents and human resources in the newer EU member countries should contribute in no small part to narrowing the income gap between old Europe and new.

Ladies and gentlemen,

According to the Bureau of Economic Analysis and the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, an increase in productivity of 1% per year leads to a doubling in the standard of living every 70 years. If this is so, then a productivity increase of 3% per year should lead to a doubling in the standard of living within one generation. For the former Eastern bloc countries this is no idle dream. We need to make up for lost years and have no desire to languish for generations catching up to the rest of Europe.

Because investment in IST increases productivity, many countries in the world, including those of Central and Eastern Europe, are placing high hopes on their IST sectors as major engines for economic growth. Although Latvia just recently joined the EU, my country has been a part of the EU/IST research community for several years. It is also part of the emerging Baltic Information Systems Cluster, which will be pooling the efforts of almost 300 companies and NGOs from Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania and Belarus. These companies employ close to 30,000 people and had a total turnover of over 2.2 billion euros in 2003. In line with the Lisbon Agenda, my countrys aim is to ensure that by 2010, the Baltic Sea area should become a leading exporter of software, integration services and outsourced services in Europe.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Fighting for a world with less economic inequality must remain a top priority for us all. As our post-industrial society is evolving into an information and knowledge society, e-inclusion, e-learning, e-health, e-government and e-collaboration in general are just some examples of applications that can provide the benefit of an Information Society to less advantaged populations, particularly in the developing countries. This will require the joint effort of all of the EUs Member States to turn promises into progress.

Latvia is ready to contribute to the reduction of the digital divide that exists not only between the developed and the developing world, but also within each society, developed and developing alike. Latvia has been actively involved in the United Nations World Summit on Information Society (WSIS) and considers it an honour to chair the Preparatory Committee of the second phase of this summit, which will take place in Tunis in November of 2005. Stakes for the WSIS Tunis phase are high, particularly on the questions of Internet governance and financial mechanisms to bridge the digital divide. The WSIS process should become an integral part of the international communitys efforts to eradicate poverty as outlined in the Millennium Development Goals, to be completed by 2015. By working together and taking advantage of technology and innovation, we can achieve those goals and perhaps even exceed them.

I urge all the governments of the European Union to ensure that the positive outcome of the Geneva phase of the Summit is preserved and complemented with new political commitments and practical undertakings in Tunis next year.

I sincerely hope that todays conference will generate new ideas on how to promote the development of ISTs for the benefit of our society.

I wish you all a productive working session.