

Building a European policy on broadband

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The European Parliament adopted a resolution based on the own-initiative report drafted by Gunnar **HÖKMARK** (EPP-ED, SE) on building a European policy on broadband. Discussing the potential of broadband, Parliament stressed that the opportunities that an internal market with nearly 500 million people connected to broadband would bring about, would give the EU the capacity to be a world leading knowledge-based economy. General access to broadband was an essential prerequisite for social development and improved public services and public authorities should make every effort to ensure that all citizens have access to broadband, thereby enabling its benefits to extend to every section of the population, particularly in the less-developed areas of the Union.

Broadband deployment in **rural areas** was a key factor in the participation of all in the knowledge society, and broadband services were equally decisive for the economic development of the regions. Member States must promote broadband connections in every school, university and educational centre in the EU, with a view to a future where no child in the EU and no individual involved in educational programmes is left off line.

The key to closing the broadband gap was **innovative technology**, which makes it possible to construct high-capacity broadband connections. Broadband services would help the least-developed regions to attract businesses, facilitate distance working, offer new medical diagnostic and care services, and achieve improved educational standards and public services. With regard to content, Parliament felt that investment in e-health, e-government and e-learning applications could play an important role in driving consumer demand for broadband, and thus create the critical mass necessary for large markets to emerge in these areas.

Private investment was essential for wider broadband deployment and universal coverage. Parliament urged the Community institutions and Member States to work with industry and address problems (such as micro-payments, security and trust, interoperability and digital rights management) that hamper the development of new business models in the field of broadband. It went on to state that the role of the Community institutions and Member States was to create a supportive environment for the development of innovation and for the introduction of new technologies by providing a regulatory framework that invites competition and private investment, and to use relevant funds to drive demand for broadband services and, where justified, to support the necessary infrastructure.

It was imperative that national regulators, competition authorities and national and local governments simultaneously give priority to **promoting more vigorous competition** in broadband markets as well as to applying remedies to address abuses of dominant positions and cartels, and finally to reducing barriers to entry, so that the market is able to deliver innovation.

Improving broadband infrastructure should be a special priority for the use of **EU structural and rural funds**. MEPs believed that these funds could also be used for upgrading or replacing broadband networks that do not provide connections with suitable functional capacity. Nevertheless, the report also calls on the Commission to closely examine whether the EU regulatory framework is fully implemented and whether state aid rules are applied whenever those funds are used for broadband investments. EU funding should not favour specific players or technological options, but only the most efficient solutions and should only be permitted in under-served areas. The Commission should ensure that all service providers have equal access to any broadband networks that have been rolled out with the help of EU structural and rural funds.

Parliament advocated **functional unbundling** of access networks of market incumbents from their operating activities, so as to ensure fair and equal treatment of all operators. It then called on the Commission, in its forthcoming green paper on universal service, to examine the availability of Internet services at reasonable rates to all citizens throughout the EU, and to consider whether there is a need to modify the existing universal service requirements. The green paper should, furthermore, address consumer concerns regarding secure and safe broadband use.