Telecommunications: universal service. 1st monitoring report

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The European Parliament voted to adopt the resolution on the Commission communication on the first monitoring report on universal service in telecommunications in the European Union. This report by Imelda Mary Read (PSE,UK) expresses the European parliament's hope that the many gaps in the information supplied by Member States will be made good in subsequent reports. It is surprised by a fall in the rate of household penetration by the telephone and feels that this requires an explanation. The Parliament feels that not enough is being done to provide special tariffs for low-income users nor to provide "special arrangements" for disabled users and therefore considers that a distinction should be made between occasional users and disadvantaged users as regards tariff arrangements to the advantage of the latter. It is concerned by the lack of clear specifications in national rules and regulations on arrangements for measuring affordability and calls for measures to reinforce consumers' rights and, by means of a comparison of Member State criteria for measuring affordability, achieve greater non-binding harmonisation of the relevant national legislation. It draws attention to the obligation of Member States to provide affordable prices throughout their territory, including rural and high-cost areas. The report stresses that the strong growth in cellular telephone penetration does not justify cutting back on public payphones. The Parliament considers that, as soon as competition permitted, it could be desirable to for the choice of operator responsible for the universal service to be determined by competitive tendering, having due regard to the quality of service provided. It places priority on the need to promote public internet access for all, to be considered when the ONP directives come up for review in 2000. Finally, it wishes to see an increased provision of schemes which provide automatic conversion to the supply of services most suited to users' consumption patterns.