

**Starting points for the welcome speech of dr. J. Poto nik, Minister for
European Affairs, at the European Ministerial Conference on Information
Society.**

Ladies and gentlemen,

Honourable guests, ministerial meetings with such a strong emphasis on developmental issues as this conference on information society are rare. The motto of the conference is “connecting Europe”. However, the information society is much more than just a connecting force of the European nations. Gradually, the information society is becoming the foundation of Europe’s worldwide competitive economy, thus realising the goal stated at the European Council Summit in Lisbon. This goal is even more important for candidate countries, which have to improve their market competitiveness at the very beginning of their future membership of the European Union. It is in the modern technologies that most of them see their development perspective. Therefore, I am convinced that the information society offers numerous opportunities which we all have to seize.

The candidate countries have taken part in the European Commission’s activities in the area of information society for the last eight years. Slovenia is very proud of the fact that the first ministerial meeting of the central European countries and European Commission on this subject was held in Bled in 1994. One of the participants of the international conference on “Information Infrastructure and Diffusion Technologies” was also a European Commissioner Martin Bangemann. The meeting in Slovenia actually followed the European Council Summit in Corfu, where the famous Bangemann Report was adopted. This shows our awareness of the importance of the development of the information society. Moreover, it was Slovenia who proposed a special declaration on information society to be adopted in Bled, confirming a political will of central European countries for active participation in the building of the European information infrastructure.

The membership of the candidate countries in the European Forum on Information society was only the first stage, that is, the political stage of the transition of their information societies. Mr. Liikanen's appointment as the European Commissioner for Information Society reoriented the activities of the European Commission from political actions to operative and concrete problem solving, expressed in the programs eEuropa and eEuropa+. The programs of Member States and candidate countries still differ, meaning that the candidate countries still lag behind the European Union. Some of the candidate countries will, however, soon become new members. Therefore, there are less and less reasons for them to be treated as part of special programs. This ministerial meeting offers the opportunity to evaluate our progress and to prepare a program, which will unite all candidate countries in the area of information society.

Europe is becoming an increasingly competitive market not only in the economic area. Smaller countries, such as Slovenia, and most of the other candidate countries will have to face the cultural and various other effects the information technologies have on the society. Therefore, it is extremely important to build an information society, as this will unite European nations on the one side, and maintain the national identity and their cultural development on the other. Personally, I am deeply convinced that the information society can contribute greatly to this idea. We only have to properly use it! The information society has to deepen the democratic achievements of the European nations and place to the foreground an individual and the quality of life. Information and communications technologies should be only the means to achieve this ambitious and yet attainable goal!

Ladies and Gentlemen, it has been more than four years now since the process of negotiations for EU membership of the present candidates - Slovenia among them - was launched. We can probably all agree - looking back at negotiations - that we should feel content with the work done so far. We have repeatedly proven to each other that we are determined to achieve our common goal. In the course of pursuing this goal, we have all shown our ability to reach the necessary compromises and also that we can trust each other. Exactly as it should be when future partners are building their relationship. We are

coming very close to the final stage of this enterprise. It is vital that we minimize any uncertainty and complete the process within the target dates. The candidate countries that are ready should be given a chance to finalize negotiations by the end of this year so that they can take part in the European Parliament elections in 2004 as members. It is also essential that we conclude our negotiations believing that we have come to the best possible solution for all rather than feeling that one or the other side has won or lost. The outcome of negotiations will be - we can say - a historic process of enlargement. Historic not only because the largest number of new members will join in, but because it will be a final realisation of the historic idea of joining all the countries of the Old Continent into one community, expanding from the Baltic Sea to the Mediterranean.

Dear guests, on behalf of the Slovenian Government and on my own I wish you a successful conference.