

ICA 37th Annual Conference

WELCOME ADDRESS

Meelis Atonen

Minister of Economic Affairs and Communications

Estonia

Meelis Atonen has a wide range of responsibilities in the fields of economy and societal development. He is also the Deputy Chair of the Reform Party in Estonia. The current government has claimed knowledge-based economy as one of its priorities. Mr Atonen, as the Minister responsible for Telecommunications as well as State Information Systems has a key role in promoting 'The Nation Going E'.

Mister Chairman, Honourable Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen

Many of you I had a chance to welcome in Tallinn last night. May I still once more welcome you all at this year's ICA's conference. It is a great honour for us to host our distinguished guests in the capital of Estonia.

Estonia has been a member of ICA since 1998. We have learned much from this cooperation – your experience and working methods have been extremely valuable for us in the process of building up our ICT environment throughout the 12 years of independence. Yes, only 10 years ago we started from scratch – the existing infrastructure had become out-dated and great changes were taking place in political, organizational, legal and social spheres of our society. I am happy to say that in a relatively short period, we have managed to build up ICT infrastructure, establish an effective coordination mechanism and ensure smooth functioning of information systems. The recognition that we have received for our developments on the international arena has definitely been a great honour for us. And we are glad to note that ICA membership has been a special part of that recognition. I would like to thank the Board and all members of ICA for giving us the opportunity to have a say in ICT-related international processes.

The Estonian government has been active in promoting e-Government services and has encouraged other state institutions to follow suit. The Cabinet itself moved from traditional sessions to web-based paperless ones already two years ago. The Government is of strong opinion that Information Society should be built for all and equal access to the Internet has to be ensured. Therefore, hundreds of public Internet access points have been opened in the public libraries all over Estonia.

Indeed, Estonia could serve as one of the examples of how to catch up with advanced countries in terms of ICT infrastructure and use of ICT in society in a short time.

I have often been asked to name the key factors of the development of the Information Society in Estonia. In my understanding, there have been several cornerstones:

- First, relatively high educational level of our population;
- Second, positive influence from our neighbours in Scandinavia, Finland in particular;
- Third, consistent support from the political leadership for the development of information society. This has allowed us to establish well-functioning legal and fiscal

frameworks. In addition, this has enabled to launch several large-scale information society projects. Here, I could mention the Estonian ID-card project, eTax office, X-road - service layer interconnecting different state registers, to name a few.

- Fourth, inherent flexibility of a small country and mentality of people who are used to fast changes in the society and
- fifth, fast development of telecom and banking sector: there are more than 700 000 internet bank clients in Estonia today (with total population of only 1.4 million).

As you all know, Estonians decided in favour of the EU membership on Sunday. Although this was a happy moment for us, we fully understand that the real work is about to begin. There are already discussions on possible areas that Estonia would like to have a stronger say about and fields, where we are ready to contribute to the Community. I personally feel that Information Society is one of the fields, where we are already competitive at international level. And in this respect I have to, once again, stress the role ICA has played in our development.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I will stop here to give the floor to Mr Aaviksoo. He will tell you about the reasons, why some nations advance better in e-society matters than others. I wish you all a successful conference and a pleasant stay in Estonia.

Thank you