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Ares (2015) 5378856

Dear Minister,

Digital technologies and broadband connectivity have revolutionised our daily lives and radically changed the way goods are produced and applications and services are delivered, in all sectors.

This is why the Commission has identified the Digital Single Market (DSM) as one of its top political priorities for 2014-2020. The DSM has the potential to unleash growth, competition, investment and innovation, while creating new sources of employment.

However, even nowadays, many territories in the EU – mostly rural and sub-urban areas – suffer from an undersupply of fast and ultra-fast connectivity and – as a result – do not fully enjoy the benefits of the Digital Single Market. Back in 2010, we set the objectives to give all Europeans access to connections of a speed of at least 30 Megabits per second (Mbps) as well as to reach 50% of households with 100 Mbps subscriptions. Yet today only 68% of the EU population is covered by fast (so-called Next Generation Access (NGA)) networks, and the situation is even worse in rural areas (25%). And while we will review our telecom framework to encourage the market players to accelerate the roll-out of faster connectivity, this is unlikely to occur in sparsely populated areas without public investment.

This is why we welcome that the majority of Member States have planned to allocate under the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) in total around EUR 6 billion to be spent for broadband projects. Moreover, the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF) has set aside EUR 0.15 billion to support innovative broadband solutions through financial instruments. In addition, a focal area of intervention of the European Fund for Strategic Investment (EFSI) under the Investment Plan for Europe will be digital infrastructures, notably broadband.

If smartly spent, these various sources of investment will become essential in bridging Europe's digital divide between urban and rural areas and boost economic growth and new opportunities for all citizens and businesses.

Now the challenge is to make it happen!

We therefore invite you to take part, on a voluntary basis, in the setup of a network of Broadband Competence Offices (BCO). By April 2016 at the latest, we call on you to designate a single contact point within each body tasked with delivering broadband measures in your Member States' operational programme(s) and rural development programme(s). We also invite you to reinforce this function by using technical assistance support as appropriate.

Each Broadband Competence Office should be able to inform and give advice to citizens and businesses and provide technical support to representatives of local and regional authorities on ways to invest effectively in broadband, including under ERDF and EAFRD operational programmes, and whenever possible in combination with financial instruments.

Each Broadband Competence Office will work in consistency and complementarity with the European Investment Advisory Hub (EIAH), and cooperate with all other relevant EU mechanisms, such as the European Rural Development Network (ENRD), the Expert Group on ESIF, the Digital Agenda High Level Group, etc. Through its Broadband Europe website¹ and regular workshops, the European Commission will offer a support facility for information sharing, mutual learning, and exchange of good practices between all the BCOs in the network as well as provide insights on EU policy, regulatory and financial opportunities that may benefit broadband projects in your territories.

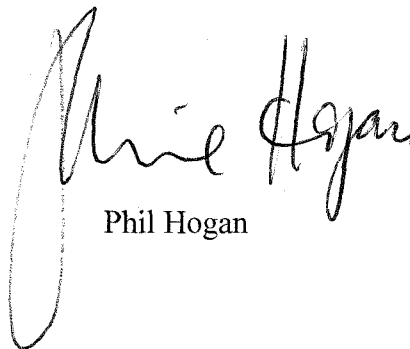
We would like to stress that those Member States that have not yet considered using EU funding for investment in broadband under their 2014-20 programmes are very much welcome to join this initiative as well, in order to share best practices or learn from their peers' experience.

Indeed, rolling out high-speed digital networks for all citizens and businesses, including in the rural and most remote areas of the EU is one of the main challenges of the coming years. It is a precondition to making the Digital Single Market a success. Comprehensive strategic planning and coordination is key.

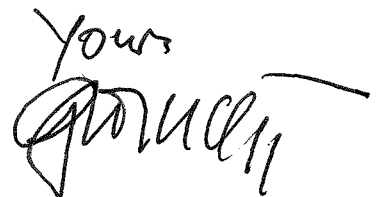
If you would like to consider joining this initiative, we would be grateful if you could indicate, by 30 November 2015, a suitable contact person in your administration.²



Corina Crețu



Phil Hogan



Günther H. Oettinger

¹ Broadband Europe: <http://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/en/broadband-europe>

² Please contact : CNECT-BROADBAND-EUROPE@ec.europa.eu