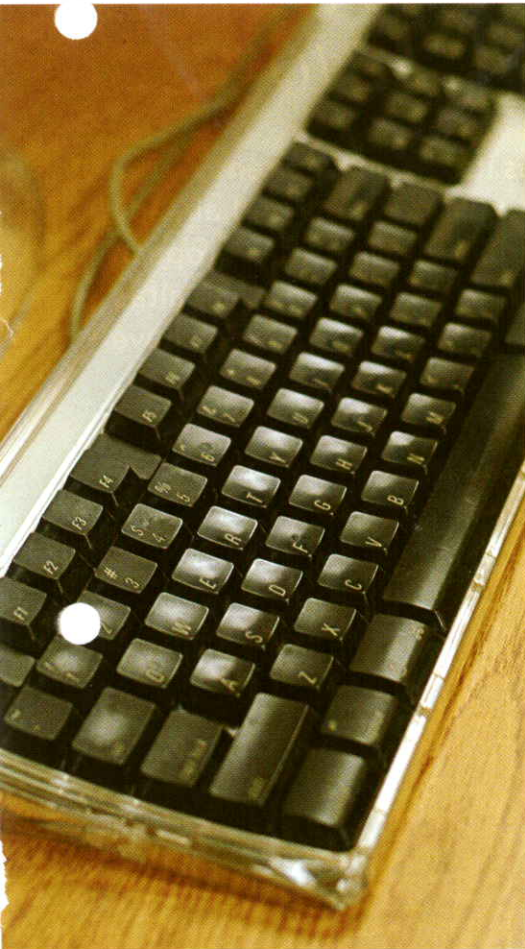




ICT - DOES THE EU HAVE WHAT IT TAKES TO STRENGTHEN ITS GLOBAL POSITION?

by Julian Micallef



Information and Communication Technology is a relatively young and exciting industry which has opened up quite a few horizons, yet essentially it still needs to operate within market realities. The European Union holds an impressive share of the global market – around 31% of the global telecom service market, and around 27% of the global telecom equipment market – more than its immediate competitors such as the United States and Japan. Still the EU continues to thrive to capture more of the opportunities available worldwide.

ICT's relevance to the Maltese economy has greatly increased in the past decade or so with hundreds of operating companies, export-oriented services and foreign direct investment that will create an industry hub, expected to contribute over €500 million annually to the country's GDP by 2014.

In 2005, the European Commission had launched its i2010 strategy intended to create a European Information Society that would generate economic growth and employment, while also making quality of life better and increasing social inclusion. To that end there has already been, and we should continue to witness, much action to create a real single European market for telecommunications. Various initiatives are expected to be discussed throughout this year, including the Digital TV Switchover and Mobile TV, following the recent developments relating to the downsizing of roaming tariffs.

Within the i2010 framework, there also exists the drive to look beyond the EU's borders and help European ICT companies to penetrate other markets. The EU Commissioner responsible for the sector, Viviane Reding, believes that the European industry should be more globally-oriented than is currently the case. As with most other industries, this is not always an easy task and multilateral relations with third countries to free up markets would need to be pursued – an issue which the European Commission claims it is working on within the WTO.

A public consultation exercise launched by the EU Commission in July is currently underway, specifically with the aim to identify the obstacles that are being faced by the industry as well as the business possibilities that exist in other areas of the world. Interested stakeholders are being asked for comments on around 55 questions covering various aspects – regulatory, research and innovation and other global issues. The Union might be home to global players in this field, but views on the situation are welcome from all who have a vested interest. The results of this exercise, open till September 17, shall then go into the drafting of an EU strategy which is expected to be published by mid-2008.

If you are involved in the ICT sector, wish that your company's interests expand further into third countries and believe that the European Union could play an important role in this regard, this could be a good opportunity to contribute your views on a way forward.

The document is available online on http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/newsroom/cf/itemdetail.cfm?item_id=3475. Further information may also be obtained from our offices on telephone 2590 9101 or by email on forumconsult@gov.mt

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