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Gigabit Infrastructure Act: For better and faster connectivity deployment across Europe

By Maarit Palovirta, Senior Director Regulatory Affairs and Xhoana SHEHU, Policy Manager, ETNO

Providing top class connectivity services is part of ETNO members' DNA, so it should come as no surprise that one of our top priorities this September is the European Commission's (EC) proposal for the Gigabit Infrastructure Act (GIA).

Europe is still far away from a fully connected continent with 56% of the population covered with FTTH and 73% with 5G. The Commission's proposal, revising and strengthening the Broadband Cost Reduction Directive (BCRD), is much needed to achieve ambitious digital targets for 2030: gigabit connectivity for everyone and 5G everywhere across the EU.

We welcome the EC proposal, as it contains many positive aspects that have the potential to speed up and lower the costs of fibre and 5G deployment.

The European Parliament is in the process of finalising its position, and it is now up to the Member States to take a bold stance on the EC proposal to make the best out of this opportunity.

As telecom operators, our members experience different types of hurdles on the ground to deploy fibre and 5G. These hurdles can significantly slow down the access of millions of European citizens, businesses, and public institutions to high-speed internet and future technologies.

How can we make the best out of the ongoing review at this crucial moment for Europe's digital transformation? Based on our experience, we would like to highlight three priorities that will have direct and important impact in EU's citizens' lives and economy.

Overcoming challenges with the right policy instrument

One of the main challenges of the BCRD is the fragmented implementation and practices across the Member States. Using a regulation instead of a directive shows the Commission's ambitions for more harmonisation, better law enforcement and timely application at the European level. This not only means taking one step further to achieve the Telecom Single Market vision, but timely application also means timely roll-out of new networks on the ground.

ETNO believes that a regulation would indeed ensure effective and timely implementation, thus providing us an updated policy framing without undue delay. We need to act now to help boost network deployment today and in the coming years.

ETNO would also like to stress that the proposal on intra-EU communications has not been backed by a justification or an impact assessment and is expected to have significant negative consequences for the industry. ETNO strongly believe that in the future, there will be no need for retail price regulation. The European Commission is currently assessing the legal regime concerning that topic.

Permits: the key to fast deployment

Today, to deploy fibre and 5G across Europe, operators face complex, lengthy, patchy and costly procedures to obtain different permits. Not every country or municipality has electronic processes; sometimes procedures include undue fees; and obtaining a permit can last much longer than the four-month legal period with delays of up to two years.

To truly accelerate the deployment of very high capacity networks, the GIA should provide concrete tools to support faster permit granting procedures. The EC's proposals to streamline permit granting and to make them consistent at the national level are essential to further harmonise the telecom single market. From a practical viewpoint, we fully support many of proposed measures cutting red tape such as tacit approvals incentivising rapid decisions on requests for permits; digitalised processes; permit granting exemptions specified at the EU level with an implementing act; and permit fees limited to administrative costs.

Let's be ambitious and preserve those provisions that are essential to support faster network deployment. We specifically encourage our policymakers to support a shorter deadline to grant permits of at least 3 months or shorter accompanied by a possibility to extend permit granting procedures only in exceptional circumstances.

The Single Information Point (SIP) will be essential to provide information on permits and civil works. However, we believe the information on planned privately funded civil works should

only be provided upon request and not in advance, to avoid artificial delays on network roll-out.

Unlocking access to infrastructures

The GIA proposal lays out a set of innovative ideas to improve network deployment such as fibre-readiness of new buildings and majorly renovated buildings. Wiring buildings is important for connecting end-users to FTTH, but it is equally important to ensure better access to physical infrastructures in order to unleash the full benefits of 5G. As public authorities own public buildings, street furniture, traffic signs and lampposts, providing access to these elements would reduce a major barrier in the roll out of new 5G-based mobile networks.

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The Gigabit Infrastructure Act offers an exciting opportunity to bring high-speed internet across Europe, fostering digital inclusion, economic growth and innovation. We call on our policymakers to be ambitious and forward-looking for our citizens and SMEs by incentivising high-speed network deployment for everybody!