



**ADDRESS BY GEORGE A. PAPANDREOU
MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF GREECE**

***WORLD SUMMIT ON THE INFORMATION SOCIETY
PLENARY SESSION***

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Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me join previous speakers in expressing my gratitude to the government of Switzerland for hosting this event. The Swiss negotiators also deserve our congratulations for their skilful negotiations which have paved the way to making this summit a success. I would also like to pay tribute to the hundreds of stakeholders who put in endless hours forging compromises on the Declaration and the Plan of Action to make this Summit a success. Thanks also to the WSIS Secretariat for their skilful handling of the preparatory process, which exceeded everyone's expectations.

The road to this Summit has been long and bumpy, but we have arrived at the first truly global gathering of leaders from all sectors to address the future of the Information Society and its implications for the welfare of mankind. The Summit's innovative participatory format provides us with an opportunity for an open and constructive exchange of ideas. The conclusions of this debate will hopefully lead to concrete commitments: all of us can and must act together to address global challenges and play an equal part in shaping the outcomes.

The Geneva Summit is taking place at a time of profound upheavals in the international political arena. Since the last UN World Conference, serious questions have been raised about the effectiveness of multilateral institutions in addressing global problems. The United Nations itself has come under attack. Some question its ability to create new mechanisms to deal effectively with the changing nature of conflict, which is steadily shifting from inter-state wars to intrastate insurgencies, trans-national crime and terrorism. Greece continues to actively support a multilateral approach in addressing regional and international issues and problems. Global security, prosperity and equality can only be achieved by reducing and eventually eliminating the asymmetry in living standards, opportunities, and physical safety between developed and underdeveloped areas. The digital divide is one such global imbalance, which urgently needs to be addressed through a multilateral framework.

This conference is a good example of how we can put our collective efforts into practice at the global level. I very much welcome the participation of civil society and the private sector in this Summit for the first time. Their contributions to the Preparatory Process have been constructive and insightful, and I hope this will establish their ongoing involvement in all our future initiatives and meetings.

Hard work is still needed to ensure the success of the Second Phase of the Summit in Tunis. We need to adopt a more effective approach to the management of preparatory work and a more cost-effective structure. The multi-stakeholder approach should be continued.

As ICTs are transforming economies and societies at a dizzying rate, no one should be left behind. Regrettably, the digital divide is growing. There may be over 550 million Internet users worldwide, but usage patterns mirror existing global discrepancies, particularly in terms of income and literacy levels. Our global village is not actually that global, since only 6% of the world is online. This lack of access to information translates into a denial of participation in both democratic processes and the knowledge-based economy.

The Information Society affects all aspects of our lives, in particular how individuals become more informed and engaged in political processes. Representative democracy is serving the majority of Western countries well. But an increase in citizen participation in elections and public discourse through information and communication technologies will contribute to a better and healthier democracy. The Internet, mobile communications, and other forms of direct democracy need to be reinforced with the involvement of civil society, the media, and political organisations at all levels – from local communities to national governments and international networks. There is a clear need for more open, multi-level deliberation, leading to the creation of a new global public space that will allow a system of progressive global governance to function effectively.

As part of this process, during the recent Greek EU Presidency, we launched an ambitious experiment to bring e-democracy to the European Union: the e-Vote. Through an interactive, online forum, the e-Vote aimed to offer citizens new ways to participate in EU policy debates and bridge the gap between citizens and their elected representatives. The e-Vote was extraordinarily successful, with over 175.000 participants. This demonstrates the value of this kind of flexible tool for engaging citizens in issues of topical and global relevance. Over 70% of participants in the e-Vote felt the development of such an electronic demos at EU level was a "very good idea". And 70% said they would make frequent use of such a forum in the future.

The development of an information society for all will help cultivate this new public space. We must enable our citizens to shape this global information society themselves, through their educational skills and access to the appropriate infrastructure. A major development in this direction is the transition from public administration services to e-government. But while e-government has contributed to a more efficient and cost-effective public sector, it still has a long way to go in encouraging and expanding the reach of real participatory democracy.

Ancient Greece has been a constant point of reference and source of inspiration to people around the world in their struggle for democracy. Greece knows as well as any other country that freedom and democracy can never be taken for granted. Our own history is testament to the fact that freedom is something we have to defend constantly; to protect and nurture. New technologies allow citizens to exercise their influence far beyond the limited channel of periodical elections; these technologies create multiple opportunities for people to get engaged directly in decisions within their own community, build interest-oriented coalitions, and networked alliances across borders and cultures. But in making the most of this potential, we must be mindful that technology will not widen social inequalities, by ensuring that access is available to all.

With this in mind, the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs has organised a Side Event on "The Promise of E-Democracy", in cooperation with UNITAR. It will be held tomorrow at 9:30 a.m. at Palexpo, Hall Cervin. A panel of world-renowned experts will engage in what promises to be a very lively debate on e-Democracy. Our aim is to come up with tangible ideas and initiatives about how ICTs can be used to enhance the relationship between citizens and governments at the local, national and international level. I would like to invite all of you to come along and share your views with us.

Thank you.