PRIORITIES IN THE DIGITAL CONNECTIVITY AND COMMUNICATION AREA

Establishment of a sectoral action plan for disasters and accidents (Disaster & Recovery)

We are witnessing serious negative impacts of climate change and a sharp increase in the number of natural and man-made disasters and the related tragic consequences. Telecommunications and ICT play a crucial role in enhancing disaster preparedness, early warning, rescue, mitigation, relief and response, and are a tool for communicating responsible institutions and citizens. Considerations of reserving and resilience of infrastructure and power supply and plans for high-quality communication equipment and services are important.

The provision of reliable telecommunications infrastructure ensures public safety, access to information and facilitates disaster relief, minimizing the risk to human life.

External crises related to military action, disrupted supply chains, the consequences of sanctions as well as climate change exacerbate the need for an established organization at national level to provide continuous, reliable and secure electronic communications services.

We will initiate an expert group to draw up sectoral recommendations to ensure that digital infrastructures work in crises. To develop a detailed framework for the preparation, provision, planning and maintenance of such infrastructure, we will work with all competent authorities and business.

We will ensure uninterrupted access to mobile services and internet connectivity at sites of national importance and remote and hard-to-reach areas (energy supply, national roaming, equipment reservation, etc.).

We will put in place uniform procedures to ensure resilient and reliable communications in the four phases of disaster risk management: mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery.

We will develop the measures taking into account the existing legal framework and international best practices and recommendations.

Data Center Development and Interconnect Policy

Bulgaria’s geographical location is a prerequisite for our country to be a preferred destination for the development of cloud infrastructures and data centres.

The competitive advantage of our country is ensured by the existence of a well-developed electronic communications infrastructure. Bulgarian specialists are prepared for the construction, operation and maintenance of such centres. We have flexible options to provide energy resources — mainly from green energy, which is the focus of industry (typical consumption of an average data centre is 5 MW).The relatively low market prices of land are also a favourable condition for establishing data centres.

Such initiatives in Bulgaria can provide high-speed connections to the countries of the European Union, Turkey and the Caucasus. The availability of well-built infrastructure enables the development of cloud services, co-location and hosting services, internet connectivity.

We will prepare a sectoral policy to attract and stimulate the construction of centres used by small business Tier-1 as Class A investment projects, taking into account successful practice in other Member States.

Universities can play an important role in building the market for interconnection due to their neutrality and independence in the market. In order to increase interconnection speeds and reduce transit and piering prices, we will launch projects to build technical infrastructure for the interconnection of network operators at the main first-stage universities in Sofia, Varna, Gabrovo, Ruse, Plovdiv.

Construction of underwater optical infrastructure in the Black Sea for data transmission

Internet traffic in the south of Europe grew by 30 % a year after 2016, with Sofia holding the third place for transit traffic after Marseille and Milan, ahead of Madrid, Barcelona, Athens and Lisbon.

Traffic from the Middle East and Central Asia to Europe is growing faster than any in the region, so an investment in the development of optical connectivity in the Black Sea will attract more traffic through the country as a strategic location to major internet exchanges (Frankfurt, London, Amsterdam, Paris, so-called FLAP ring).

The only modern submarine optic cable in the Black Sea is the Caucasus Cable System linking Georgia and Bulgaria.

The European Commission declared underwater fibre as a priority area for development in 2021. Therefore, the ministry will prioritise the launch of a joint study of business interest and pre-design activities for the construction of optical cables. Due to the specificity of laying, construction and operation, industry practice is to build such projects by consortia of telecoms, cloud suppliers and investors.

We commit to developing a policy to help build optical connectivity with the Black Sea countries and across the Bosporus with Greece, Cyprus and Egypt as major internet traffic points. Additional connectivity will reduce delays in data transmission, improve the topology of transport networks in the region, protect them against disasters and accidents, and will hopefully reduce transit prices by attracting more globally operating suppliers.

Creating market entry opportunities for Mobile Virtual Operators (MVNO)

Despite their presence in the European telecom markets, MVNO is not yet operational in Bulgaria. This form of flexible service provision allows the development of niche markets, innovative services as well as the combination of telecommunication services with various other goods and services.

Mobile virtual operators provide services to consumers by using access to the networks of existing mobile businesses.

We believe it is necessary, together with The National Regulator, to assess the potential for MVNO penetration in Bulgaria, as well as the possibilities for attracting investment in such projects.

Consumer attitudes and searches should be conducted and the possibilities for mobile network operators to offer access to capacity and various wholesale services for MVNO should be explored.

Review of the current regulatory framework for deployment of electronic communications networks

A favorable framework for investment is essential to achieve a European Gigabit society, where availability and take-up of very high capacity networks enable the widespread use of products, services and applications in the Digital Single Market.

Together with business and competent authorities, we undertake an in-depth analysis of the current national legal framework related to the deployment of electronic communications infrastructure and networks.

We will explore emerging network issues related to requirements for civil works, right of passage, coordination of hygienic and protective areas, etc.

We will pay particular attention to the rules on access to physical infrastructure, including the deployment of physical infrastructure and the deployment of electronic communications networks in buildings.

In order to address the identified problems, we will initiate proposals for regulatory amendments as well as the necessary administrative changes to the work of the competent central and local authorities.

We will take measures to realise the full functionalities of the Single Information Point (SIP) by fully integrating with eGovernment systems.

This will achieve effective provision of requested information on existing physical infrastructure for deployment of networks, including high-speed electronic communications networks through one of the SIP's electronic administrative services.

Development of broadband services in remote and sparsely populated areas

Broadband is one of the main tools for improving the economic and social well-being of the population.

It is becoming an increasingly important factor not only for the competitiveness of businesses, but also for promoting social inclusion, while at the same time expanding opportunities for the development and use of digitally enabled services, including e-government services.

The spread of high-speed connectivity can lead to a significant increase in gross domestic product, employment, the competitiveness of national economies and an increase in quality of life.

Reducing the “digital divide” by supporting the deployment of very high capacity networks in remote, sparsely populated and rural areas is enshrined in the Recovery and Resilience Plan. The selection and focus of interventions will be on areas and settlements with infrastructure gaps due to “market failure”, as well as areas lacking reliable regional or local optical data connectivity to entry points in regional and/or municipal cities where services to access the final customer are provided.

The aim is to provide access to more than three hundred users with gigabit connectivity by mid-2026.

Together with the Ministry of e-Government, we will prioritise building on the Single Electronic Communications Network of the public administration and extending the network to all 265 community centres to ensure secure cyber-resilient communications and the internet for government and national security.

Digital infrastructure is a prerequisite for unrestricted access to public services not only for business, but also for health and social services, online education and vocational training courses, cultural exchanges.

Policy of openness and shared use of infrastructure

Council of Ministers Decision No 558 of 6 August 2020 approved measures to review and analyse the availability and capacity of electronic communications networks owned by the executive and public undertakings within the meaning of Article 2 (1) of the Public Undertakings Act.

The review and analysis shows that 8 thousand kilometres of optical infrastructure have been built for the public administration, providing connectivity for over 100 municipal centres.

Joint use of existing infrastructure can reduce costs and provide quality connectivity for public authorities, citizens and businesses if unused capacity is made available to operators. Studies show that nearly 80 % of the cost of building new broadband routes is formed by laying of new channels and poles.

The measures focus on the obligation of the executive and public undertakings to fulfil their legal obligations and to submit information on planned or ongoing network infrastructure deployment activities at the Single Information Point maintained by the MTC.

Institutions managing operational programs must make provision for investment projects to include the construction of safety pipes and cable shafts in underground infrastructure, which can be used by all network operators. In the case of projects financed from the budget, it is obligatory to provide for the installation of facilities to be used in the deployment of electronic communications networks.

MTC will continue and expand this initiative by fostering the open and shared use of available

infrastructure built and operated internally by executive authorities and public undertakings.

The supply of optical infrastructure and data transport by so-called infrastructure and utilities companies on the free market is a well-established practice in the European Union and, due to the specific nature of the routes and access, would result in improved topology of digital networks, their protection against accidents and cost savings for businesses from building similar routes. This requires developing service level agreements, access procedures, renting and operating capacity, not least sharing future investment intentions to jointly build such infrastructure.

Capacity upgrade of the Single Information Point (SIP)

The SIP shall be an electronic platform providing access to information on existing physical infrastructure suitable for the deployment of electronic communications networks as well as planned and ongoing construction activities.

In 2022, we launched a project to develop and upgrade the system based on feedback received from network operators as key users with a view to improving functionalities.

In the project to upgrade the system, we will set up a functionality that will automate the process from the declaration of investment intention to the receipt of the permit, building on the project for the construction of a Unified Spatial Planning Information System, investment design and authorisation of the construction of the MRDPW.

This will reduce the administrative burden for investors and automate reporting with metrics for deadlines for project alignment, examination and approval to make the weak points in the process visible. It will be possible for electronic communications network operators to submit applications electronically to the competent authorities (local and others) responsible for granting/refusing the necessary permits to deploy electronic communications networks.

SIP should also be able to play an extended role as a coordinator of preventive and emergency maintenance activities for the infrastructure entered into the system, but there is no mechanism for active information sharing with all stakeholders. To optimize the process, it will be possible to automatically notify and generate a shared schedule for upcoming repair activities, locations, nature of work, start and end, etc. This will help repair damage from accidents, reduce maintenance costs by network operators in infrastructure sharing, reduce connectivity disruptions and increase service quality.

SIP will collect data on geographic surveys for the deployment of networks. The system will be built on a new module that will provide information on the availability of broadband connection at address level where possible. A new data subsystem creating thematic broadband maps will be developed and implemented. In addition, layers and a search capability in the IT system for available coverage and speeds to an area and/or address for mobile and fixed networks will be added in order to facilitate the choice of the final customer when selecting the operator.

It is also envisaged to expand the capacity of the GIS based electronic platform by developing functionalities for the establishment of a National Access Point for Multimodal Travel Information Services. This will ensure cross-sectoral synergies and improve services for end-users.

Joint initiatives with other competent authorities

We are working to support faster roaming tariff reduction processes with the Republic of North Macedonia and the Western Balkan countries in the context of the Roadmap for Reducing Roaming tariffs for Western Balkan countries and EU Member States proposed by the European Commission.

We continue the active work to secure the spectrum needed for the development of 5G networks. Part of the 700 MHz and 800 MHz bands are still used for national security purposes. The frequency bands freed up have not been made available to operators for the provision of electronic communications services, even though they are key to the development of 5G networks to provide coverage in remote and sparsely populated areas.

We are creating conditions for the release of the entire radio frequency resource in both scopes. The aim is to define reasonable size temporary 'sanitary' areas in which operators' radio equipment will not be installed, until national security lanes are fully released.

We remain an active participant in the negotiation process at European Union level to ensure the protection of Bulgarian interest and the adoption of legislation that is part of the vision of a data-driven economy within the so-called Digital Decade.