INTERVIEW

Interview with Xavier Bettel –
Prime Minister and Minister for Communications and Media
of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, 28 September 2015

The FTTH Council Europe: Luxembourg has long been an ambitious country in the
deployment of state-of-the art communications networks. In your view, what were the key
challenges and what lessons were learned?

Xavier Bettel: Communications networks are the highways of the digital society. They connect
citizens, businesses and public authorities. Communications networks stimulate economic and
social development, hence their particular importance for rural areas.

Historically, Luxembourg has an open economy which is partly due to its geographical position
in Western Europe, right on the major North-South transport routes.

It comes therefore with no surprise that beyond excellent road, rail and air connections,
Luxembourg also sought to have the best Internet connections, be it for the backbone part or
for broadband connections for business and citizens. And the results are there: Luxembourg
has the highest backbone bandwidth per Internet user and very high speed Internet is
available to almost all of the population.

As the returns are rather long than short term, it is, indeed, always a challenge to convince
stakeholders to think ahead of their time and plan for future needs. You have to convince
market players that the political objectives will be beneficial to their own cause. Experience
has shown that if you seed networks, you will harvest traffic – meaning business. In
Luxembourg, we saw that once this message understood, the market will create its own
dynamics.

The FTTH Council Europe: As Luxembourg’s Minister for Communications and Media, you
have launched a plan for the development of a digital economy in your country, called
“Digital Lëtzebuerg” (“Digital Luxembourg”). What are the main objectives and successes of
this plan?

Xavier Bettel: Digital Lëtzebuerg was launched in October 2014. The initiative is not limited to
electronic communications, but covers all areas of the digital society. All stakeholders,
whether public or private, are encouraged to contribute actively.
Digital Lëtzebuerg aims at consolidating Luxembourg’s long term competitiveness by taking advantage of information and communication technologies and turning Luxembourg into a smart nation.

At this stage, efforts concentrate on seven themes: infrastructure, innovation, FinTech, e-skills, electronic administration and promotion. Concrete measures presented so far comprise the regulatory proposals regarding open data or the Digital4Education action plan. With regard to innovation, my government will present an ambitious support scheme open to start-ups from all over Europe. In the field of broadband, we have developed an interactive map displaying broadband coverage of each municipality – a first! And before summer, I sent a draft law to Parliament, to ensure that adequate in-house cabling is put into place so that each inhabitant can access high-speed Internet.

The biggest success so far is certainly the large support received by all stakeholders, as Digital Lëtzebuerg is a truly horizontal initiative. We have seen many organizations announcing their own actions under the umbrella of Digital Lëtzebuerg. For instance, for e-skills, one of my government’s top priorities, private stakeholders have agreed to set-up and finance an ICT competence center.

The FTTH Council Europe: Since Luxembourg’s recent Presidency of the Council of the European Union, you have repeatedly emphasized the importance of “building bridges between countries”. What role do you think broadband and telecommunication play in the creation of a Connected Europe?

Xavier Bettel: Telecommunication was one of my priorities at the launch of our Presidency, since we started with finalizing the compromise reached by the Latvian Presidency on the Commission’s “Connected Continent” proposal. We now know the exact date for the end of roaming surcharges within the EU which will be 15 June 2017. It is obvious that telecommunication in general and broadband in particular are enablers for communication, be it among citizens, companies, organisations or nations. With roaming surcharges disappearing in the not so far future, we will have made a major step forward towards a true connected Europe.

I believe that modern means of electronic communications are an essential enabler for active participation in society. Just think of all the administrative procedures that can be handled online or the vast opportunities presented by e-health solutions. Electronic communications in general and broadband in particular empower users and help provide better services for all.

And we’re only just at the beginning. The Internet of things is growing in importance and will soon be omnipresent – thanks to ubiquitous connectivity.
The FTTH Council Europe: How do you see the future of broadband in Europe? What role do you think FTTH will play in this context?

Xavier Bettel: Connectivity is key! In 2015, connectivity equals broadband or – even better - very high speed broadband. As I’ve pointed out before, broadband connectivity is a precious enabler for an active participation in the economy and the society at large. Therefore, we must continue on the European Union level to support initiatives that support the roll-out of broadband networks. For instance, I’m confident the Juncker plan will contribute to that objective.

Generally, I welcome the competition and complementarity between different technologies.

Obviously, fiber-to-the-home is one of the most, if not the most promising technology for delivering very high speed broadband. That’s also the reason, why we attach great importance to this technology in our national broadband strategy. DOCSIS 3 cable networks also deliver excellent speeds and we see that as these networks are upgraded, they bring fiber closer and closer to their customers.

I’m happy to see that in Luxembourg, we enjoy an excellent mobile broadband coverage, with 4G being available to some 95% of the population.

In remote areas, where there is no business model for FTTH or other fixed broadband networks, satellite plays an important role. Broadband via satellite is a very cost effective solution and is often used in combination with other technologies to feed broadband into small networks in rural areas.

So, while FTTH stays an extremely performant solution for fixed broadband, I consider that different technologies are needed for different situations.

The FTTH Council Europe: What is your motivation in giving the opening speech at the FTTH Conference 2016 in Luxembourg-City? What can we expect from your keynote?

Xavier Bettel: I like being in direct contact with people that “make things happen”. That’s also part of the general political culture here in Luxembourg, where we find solutions by involving all parties involved. Thus, I did not hesitate to accept the invitation for the opening speech of the FTTH Conference 2016. Among others, it will be an occasion for me to present my government’s view on broadband and the electronic communications sector at large, but also to look back at the results of our Presidency.

Let me add that before being Prime Minister and Minister for Communications and Media, I was the mayor of Luxembourg-city. Hence, welcoming a global community of experts and decision makers in the field of FTTH in our capital is of particular importance to me and I look forward to meeting them and having some exciting discussions.
About the FTTH Council Europe

The FTTH Council Europe is an industry organisation with a mission to accelerate the availability of fibre-based, ultra-high-speed access networks to consumers and businesses. The Council promotes this technology because it will deliver a flow of new services that enhance the quality of life, contribute to a better environment and increase economic competitiveness. The FTTH Council Europe consists of more than 150 member companies. www.ftthcouncil.eu

Press contact:
Jean-Michaël MASSENYA
pr@ftthcouncil.eu or call +33 625 90 28 60