

EU and Australia launch talks for a broad trade agreement

Today, Commissioner for Trade Cecilia **Malmström**, together with Prime Minister of Australia Malcolm Turnbull and Australian Trade Minister Steven Ciobo, officially launched negotiations for a comprehensive and ambitious trade agreement between the EU and Australia in the Australian capital of Canberra. The aim of the negotiations is to remove barriers to trade in goods and services, create opportunities for small and large companies, as well as setting ambitious rules in line with other trade agreements of the EU, contributing to shape global trade. Commissioner for Trade Cecilia **Malmström** said: *"I look forward to adding Australia to our ever-expanding circle of like-minded trade partners. In challenging times, it is heartening to see that Australia shares our commitment to a positive trade agenda, and to the idea that good trade agreements are a win for both sides. The result of our negotiations will be an agreement that offers clear benefits for both the EU and Australia. It will boost economic opportunity for businesses, both big and small, and create jobs.* Following today's announcement, the first formal round of talks between the respective sides' teams of negotiators will take place in Brussels from 2 to 6 July. Australia is one of the world's fastest-growing developed economies. The future EU-Australia agreement will let European companies compete on a level playing-field with businesses from those countries with which Australia already has trade agreements. The EU is already Australia's second biggest trade partner. Bilateral trade in goods between the EU and Australia reaches almost €48 billion a year and increase by over a third thanks to the agreement. Bilateral trade in services is around €28 billion. Information about the negotiations, including [factsheet](#), [examples of exporters](#), statistics and other material, is available [online](#). See also the full [press release](#) and the related [videos and photos](#). *(For more information: Daniel Rosario – Tel.: +32 229 56185; Kinga Malinowska – Tel: +32 229 51383)*

Migration: Decrease in number of asylum applications in the EU continues in 2018

New figures published today by the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) show the trend of significant decreased asylum applications has continued in 2018. During the first four months of 2018, 197,000 persons asked for asylum in the EU, Norway and Switzerland, a lower level than during the same period in each of the last three years. 2017 had already seen a significant decrease with a total of 728,470 arrivals throughout the year, a 44% decrease compared to 2016. In 2018, Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan continued to be the main countries of origin of applicants. More information can be found in the [press release](#) issued by EASO today. The full Annual Report on the Situation of Asylum in the EU 2017 is also available [online](#). *(For more information: Natasha Bertaud – Tel.: +32 229 67456; Tove Ernst – Tel.: +32 229 86764; Markus Lammert– Tel.: +32 229 80423)*

Artificial Intelligence: Commission discusses ethical and social impact with

philosophical and non-confessional organisations

Today, the European Commission hosted a high-level meeting with 12 representatives from philosophical and non-confessional organisations from across Europe, as part of the regular dialogue with churches, religions, philosophical and non-confessional organisations foreseen by Article 17 of the Lisbon Treaty. This ninth annual high-level meeting discussed the topic *“Artificial Intelligence: addressing ethical and social challenges”*. Today’s meeting was chaired by Vice-President Andrus **Ansip**. First Vice-President Frans **Timmermans**, responsible for the Article 17 Dialogue said: *“Our societies are in the midst of an unprecedented digital revolution which will impact every person living on the planet. This revolution brings new promises, and new risks of disruption. We have seen recently that the digital world moved faster than the ethical discussion about what could and should be allowed online. We cannot risk the same thing happening with Artificial Intelligence and automatization. We need to be in control of this transformation, and make sure that it is used to foster our values and defend our social model”*. Andrus **Ansip**, Vice-President for the Digital Single Market, said: *“From better healthcare to safer transport, the benefits of artificial intelligence are many and Europe should grab them. Along with increased investments, we are developing ethical guidelines for the development of AI for good and for all. This requires an open discussion on key issues such as the importance of diversity and gender balance in AI to avoid biased decisions. Today’s meeting and the recent set up of the European AI Alliance contribute to this broad debate.”* A full press release is available [here](#). Several other events on AI are also happening in parallel in Brussels. Commissioner for the Digital Economy and Society Mariya **Gabriel** delivered this morning a speech on the European approach to AI at the stakeholder summit *“A European Strategy for Artificial Intelligence”*. This afternoon she will participate in a conference on AI bringing together Member States’ representatives involved in the Digitising European Industry initiative. She will close the conference with a keynote speech at 16:30 Brussels time. (For more information: Alexander Winterstein – Tel.: +32 229 93265; Katarzyna Kolanko – Tel.: +32 229 63444)

The European Fiscal Board publishes its yearly report on euro area fiscal policy direction

Today, the independent European Fiscal Board (EFB) has published its assessment of the general orientation of fiscal policy in the euro area. The report concludes that the favourable economic outlook offers a prime opportunity to rebuild fiscal buffers. Especially euro area Member States with a high government debt-to-GDP ratio need to do more than simply accrue the budgetary benefits of the economic expansion. The report notes that this is the time to move towards a somewhat more restrictive orientation of fiscal policy in the euro area. The EFB also emphasises that the current expansion is a prime opportunity to progress with plans to complete the architecture of Europe’s Economic and Monetary Union. This includes an upgrade of the EU’s fiscal framework and a capacity for joint stabilisation for the euro area. In this respect, the EFB notes that the European Commission’s recent proposal to establish a European Investment Stabilisation Function is a useful step in

the right direction, which could be complemented. The EFB is an independent body mandated to advise on the overall direction of fiscal policy of the euro area and to evaluate how the EU fiscal governance framework is executed. It was formally established end 2015 and began operating shortly after its members were appointed in October 2016. The report and press release will be available [online](#). (For more information: Christian Spahr – Tel.: +32 229 50055; Annikky Lamp – Tel.: +32 229 56151)

Mergers: Commission approves the acquisition of Uniper by Fortum

The European Commission has approved unconditionally under the EU Merger Regulation the acquisition of Uniper by Fortum. Both companies are active in the energy sector. The Commission's investigation found that the transaction: i) Is unlikely to hinder effective competition in the generation and supply of electricity given, in particular, the combined moderate market share of the parties in Sweden (around 30%), the high level of interconnectivity with neighbouring countries, the significant spare capacity available in Sweden and the likely reaction of other producers to any price increases by the merged entity; ii) Will not increase the risk of coordination in the generation and wholesale of electricity in Sweden, for example due to the complexity of such a strategy; iii) Is unlikely to lead to distortions of competition with regard to ancillary services in Sweden, in particular because of the available spare capacity and/or possible third-party expansion, the possibility of importing electricity and the fact that the grid operator is actively increasing the potential for new suppliers to participate in these markets; iv) Will not materially decrease the liquidity of the financial electricity market in the Nordic countries or to raise trading prices. Therefore, the Commission concluded that the transaction would raise no competition concerns in any of the affected markets. Commissioner Margrethe Vestager, in charge of competition policy, said: *"Ensuring competition in European power markets is essential since electricity is a good that everyone uses. Fortum and Uniper are important players in the generation of electricity in the Nordic countries, in particular in Sweden. We can approve their proposed merger, in particular because of the high level of interconnectivity between different countries in the Nordic area and because there is significant spare generation capacity in Sweden. As a result, we found that competition will remain strong after the merger."* A full press release is available in [EN](#), [DE](#), [FR](#), [FI](#). (For more information: Ricardo Cardoso – Tel.: +32 229 80100; Maria Sarantopoulou – Tel.: +32 229 13740)

Mergers: Commission clears Comcast's proposed acquisition of Sky under EU merger rules

The European Commission has approved unconditionally under the EU Merger Regulation the proposed acquisition of Sky by Comcast. The proposed transaction would combine Sky plc (Sky), the leading pay-TV operator in Austria, Germany, Ireland, Italy and the UK and Comcast Corporation (Comcast), owner of Universal Pictures, as well as an operator of TV channels such as CNBC, Syfy or E!. The Commission found that the proposed transaction

would lead to only a limited increase in Sky's existing share of the markets for the acquisition of TV content, as well as in the market for the wholesale supply of TV channels in the relevant Member States. Given that the merging companies are mainly active at different levels of the market, the Commission's assessment focused on whether, as a result of the proposed transaction: i) Comcast would be able to prevent or significantly limit access by Sky's competitors to its films and other TV content or to its TV channels. The Commission concluded that these possible concerns were not founded; ii) Sky would have the incentive to cease purchasing content from Comcast's competitors. The Commission found that this was unlikely as it would reduce the quality of Sky's product offering; iii) Sky could prevent competing channels from accessing its platform. The investigation found that the merged companies' ability to shut out Comcast's rivals was significantly mitigated by existing regulations in the UK, Germany and Austria. In addition, competitors that could have been targeted for exclusion are either contractually protected for a sufficient period of time or are not dependent on Sky's retail platform in the relevant Member States. Based on the results of its market investigation, the Commission concluded that the proposed transaction would raise no competition concerns. A full press release is available in [EN](#), [DE](#), [FR](#). (For more information: Ricardo Cardoso – Tel.: +32 229 80100; Maria Sarantopoulou – Tel.: +32 229 13740)

Mergers: Commission clears the acquisition of sole control over the destination management services business of Hotelbeds Group by TUI

The European Commission has approved, under the EU Merger Regulation, the acquisition of sole control over the destination management services business of the Hotelbeds Group by TUI of Germany. The destination management services business of Hotelbeds Group offers specialised receptive services for travellers such as welcoming at airports or bus stations and transfer services to their hotels. TUI is an integrated leisure tourism group. The Commission concluded that the proposed acquisition would raise no competition concerns because of the limited impact it would have on the market. The transaction was examined under the simplified merger review procedure. More information is available on the Commission's [competition](#) website, in the public [case register](#) under the case number [M.8930](#). (For more information: Ricardo Cardoso – Tel.: +32 229 80100; Maria Sarantopoulou – Tel.: +32 229 13740)

ANNOUNCEMENTS

First Vice-President Timmermans in Warsaw for dialogue on the Rule of Law

First Vice-President Frans **Timmermans** is today in Warsaw, Poland, to continue the Commission's dialogue with the Polish authorities on the threat to the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary in the country. The First Vice-President is meeting Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki this morning, with a joint press point following their talks. This meeting is the latest exchange in a process launched in January 2016, and which has led to four [Commission Recommendations](#) setting out the steps that the Polish

authorities can take to remedy the situation and the triggering of the Article 7 (1) procedure. *(For more information: Christian Wigand– Tel.: +32 229 62253; Katarzyna Kolanko – Tel.: +32 229 63444)*

European Commission hosts Meeting with Ministers of Interior from the Western Balkans to discuss cooperation on border management, migration and security [Updated on 18/6/2018 at 15:40]

Tomorrow, Commissioner for Migration, Home Affairs and Citizenship Dimitris **Avramopoulos** is hosting a meeting, with Ministers of Interior from the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Hercegovina, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Kosovo) with the participation of the Bulgarian Presidency and the future Austrian Presidency of the Council of the European Union. Commissioner for the Security Union Julian **King** and Executive Director of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency Fabrice Leggeri will also take part in the meeting. Participants will discuss the latest migratory developments, cooperation on border management, migration and security as well as priorities under the Western Balkan Strategy in view of the EU-Western Balkans Home Affairs Ministerial in October 2018. The press point by Commissioner **Avramopoulos** will take place tomorrow around 15:15 and will be streamed live on [EBS](#). *(For more information: Natasha Bertaud – Tel.: +32 2 296 74 56; Tove Ernst – Tel.: +32 229 86764; Katarzyna Kolanko – Tel.: +32 229 63444)*

Commissioner Stylianides travels to Poland

Today Commissioner for Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Management Christos **Stylianides** is in Poland to meet the authorities and discuss civil protection and humanitarian aid. He will meet the Deputy Minister of Interior Ms Renata Szczech to present and exchange views on [rescEU](#) – the Commission’s proposal to strengthen Europe’s ability to deal with disasters in the framework of the [European Civil Protection Mechanism](#). Poland is one of the 34 participating states to the European Civil Protection Mechanism and has both provided and received assistance during times of natural or man-made disasters. The proposal put forward by the European Commission in November 2017 is set to upgrade the existing mechanism in order to more effectively address natural hazards in Europe: floods, forest fires, earthquakes and epidemics. Commissioner **Stylianides** will meet the Minister for Humanitarian Aid Beata Kempa and the Undersecretary of State Andrzej Papierz to discuss issues related to humanitarian aid and civil protection. In particular, they will discuss the humanitarian situation in neighbouring Ukraine, as well as the humanitarian challenges in the Middle East and Africa, as well as [education in emergencies](#) as a priority of EU humanitarian response. Commissioner **Stylianides** will also meet with Polish NGOs engaged in humanitarian aid actions. *(For more information: Carlos Martin Ruiz de Gordejuela – Tel.: +32 229 65322; Daniel Puglisi – Tel.: +32 229 69140)*

Commission holds high-level conference on the European retail sector

Tomorrow, 19 June, the Commission is hosting a [high-level conference](#) in Brussels on how to support a more open, integrated and competitive EU retail sector. Vice-President Jyrki **Katainen** and Commissioner Elżbieta **Bieńkowska**

will address an audience of representatives of national and local authorities, retailers and other businesses, international organisations, civil society and academia. Other speakers include Lachezar Borisov, Deputy Minister of Economy of Bulgaria, Kris Peeters, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Employment, Economy and Consumer Affairs of Belgium, and Pascal Arimont, Member of the European Parliament. Just two months after the Commission set out [best practices](#) to make the European retail sector fit for the 21st century, the conference provides a platform to discuss how to adapt to new developments in the field. The sector is changing rapidly with the development of e-commerce and multi-channel retailing. Retail and wholesale activities are one of the largest services sectors in Europe, with almost one in ten Europeans employed in over 3.6 million retail companies. The [conference is web-streamed](#) and journalists can register by [email](#). (*For more information: Lucía Caudet – Tel.: +32 229 56182; Maud Noyon – Tel.: +32 229-80379; Victoria von Hammerstein – Tel.: +32 229 55040*)

Digital4Her conference: Building a gender balanced digital sector

Tomorrow, Commissioner for the Digital Economy and Society Mariya **Gabriel** will host [Digital4Her](#) conference in Brussels focusing on gender equality in the digital sector. At the event, a number of tech, digital, telecom and media companies will sign a declaration aiming to promote and increase the [participation of women](#) within their corporate structures. A new networking platform for stakeholders called European Network for Women in Digital, will also be launched. This network will facilitate the collaboration and the building of an inclusive and gender balanced digital sector in Europe. Finally, with the input of the panels, Commissioner **Gabriel** will present the “Women in Digital” Action Plan composed on concrete actions and best practices to be promoted at all levels. The conference will be livestreamed, the main stage can be followed [here](#) and startup pitches and press conferences [here](#). Further details on the event are available [here](#) and on women in digital [here](#). (*For more information: Nathalie Vandystadt – Tel.: +32 229 67083; Inga Höglund – Tel.: +32 229 50698*)

[Upcoming events](#) of the European Commission (ex-Top News)