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EU solidarity at work: Commission offers financial aid to France, Greece, Spain and Portugal following natural disasters

Today the Commission proposes to give €104 million from the EU Solidarity Fund (EUSF) to four Member States that were hit by natural disasters in 2017. The aid package includes €50.6 million for Portugal and €3.2 million for Spain following the forest fires of the summer and October 2017, €49 million for the French regions of Saint-Martin and Guadeloupe, after hurricanes Irma and Maria and €1.3 million for the Greek island of Lesbos after the June 2017 earthquake. Commissioner for Regional policy Corina **Creţu** said: *"In Portugal, in Spain, and from the Greek island of Lesbos far off in the Aegean sea to the French Outermost regions in the Caribbean, the EU leaves no one alone in the face of tragedy. Once again the Solidarity Fund shows the EU's unfailing support for reconstruction works following natural disasters and for helping rebuilding people's lives."* This is a concrete delivery on the **Juncker** Commission's promise to offer more than condolences when an EU country is struck by a disaster. EU Solidarity Fund money can be used to support reconstruction efforts and cover some of the costs of emergency services, temporary accommodation, clean-up operations and protection of cultural heritage, in order to relieve the financial burden borne by national authorities. A full press release is available here. Factsheets on EUSF interventions in Spain, France, Greece and Portugal can be found online, as well as more information on how EUSF aid is calculated. *(For more information: Nathalie Vandystadt – Tel.: +32 229 67083; Sophie Dupin de Saint-Cyr – Tel.: +32 229 56169)*

Social media companies need to do more to fully comply with EU consumer rules

Social media companies need to do more to respond to the requests, made last March by the European Commission and Member States' consumer authorities, to comply with EU consumer rules. The changes made by Facebook, Twitter and Google+ to align their terms of services with EU consumer protection rules have been published today. These changes will already benefit more than a quarter of a billion of EU consumers who use social media: EU consumers will not be forced to waive mandatory EU consumer rights, such as their right to withdraw from an on-line purchase; they will be able to lodge their complaints in Europe, rather than in California; and the platforms will take up their fair share of responsibilities towards EU consumers, similarly to the off-line service providers. However, the changes only partially fulfil the requirements under EU consumer law. Vera **Jourová**, European Commissioner for Justice, Consumers and Gender Equality said: *"As social media networks are used as advertising and commercial platforms, they must fully respect consumer rules. I am pleased that the enforcement of EU rules to protect consumers by national authorities is bearing fruit, as some companies are now making their platforms safer for consumers; however, it is unacceptable that this is not complete and that it is taking so much time. This confirms that we need a 'New Deal for Consumers': EU consumer rules should be respected and if companies don't comply, they should face sanctions."* While Google's latest proposals appear to be in line with the requests made by consumer authorities, Facebook and, more significantly, Twitter, have only partially addressed important issues about their liability and about how users are informed of possible content removal or contract termination. The national consumer authorities and the Commission will monitor the implementation of the promised changes and will actively use the notice and action procedure provided by the companies. Moreover, authorities may take action including enforcement measures where necessary. A full press release, as well as a table summarising the main changes made by the companies are available online. *(For more information:Nathalie Vandystadt – Tel.: +32 229 67083; Mélanie Voin – Tel.: +32 229 58659)*

La Commissaire Gabriel à la Berlinale 2018 : 6 films cofinancés par le programme MEDIA en compétition pourles Ours d'Or et d'Argent

La 68ème édition du Festival International de Berlin (la Berlinale) a ouvert ses portes aujourd'hui jusqu'au 25 février. Au total, 18 films participant à différentes sélections du festival ont été cofinancés par le programme MEDIA d'Europe Créative de soutien au développement et à la distribution du cinéma européen avec un total de 895 000 euros. Parmi ces œuvres, six sont en compétition pour les Ours d'Or et d'Argent, comme *3 Days in Quiberon*, par la réalisatrice allemande Emily Atef, ou encore*Figlia mia*, le film de la cinéaste italienne Laura Bispuri. Pendant la Berlinale, Mariya **Gabriel**, Commissaire pour l'économie et la société numériques, participera au Forum européen du film (European Film Forum) le 19 février, où elle donnera un discours sur le cinéma européen, la culture et le numérique. Cette année, le Forum organisera un débat sur le thème du "*L'Avenir de MEDIA – relier les Européens par les films*". Au cours du Forum, la Commissaire **Gabriel** rencontrera d'éminents cinéastes, commeCristian Mungiu, Radu Mihaileanu, Isabel Coixet ou Wim Wenders. Elle rencontrera également les producteurs de la série allemande *Babylon Berlin*. D'autres événements financés par MEDIA, comme le Marché de la co-production de la Berlinale, le Berlinale Talents ou le Shooting Stars auront également lieu pendant l'événement. Le programme et la liste des intervenants au Forum européen du film sont disponibles ici; le Forum peut également être suivi en direct. Plus d'informations sur le programme MEDIA sont disponibles ici. (*Pour plus d'informations: Nathalie Vandystadt – Tel.: +32 229 67083; Inga Höglund – Tel.: +32 229 50698; Julia-Henriette Bräuer – Tel.: +32 229 80707)*

Soutien aux régions ultrapériphériques: la Commission lance une task force pour les énergies renouvelables à la Réunion

Aujourd'hui à la Réunion, la Commission lance un nouveau groupe de travail spécial pour accompagner la transition énergétique sur l'île. Cette "task force" est créée dans le cadre de la nouvelle Stratégie européenne pour les Régions ultrapériphériques, qui prévoit un soutien sur mesure pour chacune des neuf régions européennes ultramarines. Ces régions, comme la Réunion, disposent souvent de meilleures sources d'énergie renouvelables que l'Europe continentale mais des obstacles techniques, économiques et législatifs entravent la pleine exploitation de leur potentiel. *"Accroître l'autosuffisance énergétique de la Réunion aura des retombées économiques considérables, en termes de croissance, de compétitivité et de création* *d'emplois locaux. Cela va également contribuer à la mise en œuvre des objectifs de la politique de l'UE en matière d'énergie et de climat,"* a déclaré la Commissaire à la politique régionale Corina **Crețu**. C'est effectivement l'objectif de cette nouvelle "task force" qui regroupe, outre la Commission, la Banque européenne d'investissement, le Ministère français de la transition écologique et solidaire, le Conseil régional, la Préfecture, l'Agence Française du Développement, EDF, l'Agence de l'environnement et de la maîtrise de l'énergie, la Caisse des dépôts et des consignations et d'autres acteurs publics et privés. Ces partenaires s'appliqueront à définir un plan d'action commun visant à aider la région à devenir énergétiquement plus autonome. Plus d'information sur la nouvelle Stratégie européenne pour les Régions ultrapériphériques et le soutien de l'UE à la Réunion est disponible en ligne. *(Pour plus d'information: Nathalie Vandystadt – Tel.: +32 229 67083; Sophie Dupin de Saint-Cyr – Tel.: +32 229 56169)*

VAT: Commission launches compliance check to assess whether businesses are refunded quickly enough in all Member States

The European Commission today launched a compliance check to assess whether VAT refunds to business in EU Member States are in line with current EU law and case law of the European Court of Justice. A lack of access to a simple and fast VAT refund procedure can have a major impact on cash flows and on the competitiveness of businesses. This is especially true for the smallest companies who cannot afford to go through long and burdensome procedures to get the VAT they are owed back from the State. Over the next eight months, tax provisions in each Member State will be scrutinised to ensure that refund procedures allow businesses to quickly and easily recover VAT credits both in their own country and in other EU countries. The study will examine, for example, the length of time it takes to complete procedures in each country and any unnecessary hurdles in the system which can create financial risks for business. The Commission could decide to launch infringements procedures in cases of non-compliance with the rules. This exercise forms part of the Commission's efforts towards a Single VAT area where administrative burdens for business, in particular micro-businesses and SMEs, will be drastically reduced. *(For more information: Daniel Rosario – Tel.: +32 229 56185; Patrick McCullough – Tel.: +32 229 87183)*

Concentrations: la Commission autorise l'acquisition de Refresco par PAI Partners et bcIMC

La Commission Européenne a approuvé, en vertu du règlement européen sur les concentrations, l'acquisition de Refresco Group, basée aux Pays Bas par PAI Partners, basée en France et British Columbia Investment Management Corporation (bcIMC), basée au Canada. Refresco fabrique des jus de fruits, des boissons sans alcool et des eaux minérales, et conditionne de la bière, du cidre, des boissons à base de mélanges alcoolisés et des boissons gazeuses alcoolisées dans des canettes ainsi que dans des bouteilles en PET. PAI gère et conseille des fonds de capital-investissement spécialisés. bcIMC investit, pour le compte de clients du secteur public, dans des instruments à revenu fixe, des hypothèques, des titres publics et privés, l'immobilier, les infrastructures et les ressources renouvelables. La Commission a conclu que la concentration envisagée ne soulèverait pas de problème de concurrence, dans la mesure où les entreprises ne sont pas actives sur le même marché ou sur des marchés liés ou complémentaires. L'opération a été examinée dans le cadre de la procédure simplifiée de contrôle des concentrations. De plus amples informations sont disponibles sur le site internet concurrence de la Commission, dans le registre public des affaires sous le numéro d'affaire M.8755. *(For more information: Ricardo Cardoso – Tel.: +32 229 80100; Yizhou Ren – Tel.: +32 229 94889)*

Eurostat: Euro area international trade in goods surplus €25.4 bn

The first estimate for euro area (EA19) exports of goods to the rest of the world in December 2017 was €180.7 billion, an increase of 1.0% compared with December 2016 (€179.0 bn). Imports from the rest of the world stood at €155.3 bn, a rise of 2.5% compared with December 2016 (€151.4 bn). As a result, the euro area recorded a €25.4 bn surplus in trade in goods with the rest of the world in December 2017, compared with +€27.6 bn in December 2016. Intra-euro area trade rose to €142.4 bn in December 2017, up by 2.8% compared with December 2016. A Eurostat press release is available here. *(For more information: Daniel Rosario – Tel.: +32 229 56185; Kinga Malinowska – Tel.: +32 229 51383)*

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

Social media companies need to do more to fully comply with EU consumer rules

The changes made by Facebook, Twitter and Google+ to align their terms of services with EU consumer protection rules have been published today.

These changes will already benefit more than a quarter of a billion of EU consumers who use social media: EU consumers will not be forced to waive mandatory EU consumer rights, such as their right to withdraw from an on-line purchase; they will be able to lodge their complaints in Europe, rather than in California; and the platforms will take up their fair share of responsibilities towards EU consumers, similarly to the off-line service providers. However, the changes only partially fulfil the requirements under EU consumer law.

Vera **Jourová**, European Commissioner for Justice, Consumers and Gender Equality said: *"As social media networks are used as advertising and commercial platforms, they must fully respect consumer rules. I am pleased that the enforcement of EU rules to protect consumers by national authorities is bearing fruit, as some companies are now making their platforms safer for consumers; however, it is unacceptable that this is still not complete and it is taking so much time. This confirms that we need a 'New Deal for Consumers': EU consumer rules should be respected and if companies don't* *comply, they should face sanctions."*

While Google's latest proposals appear to be in line with the requests made by consumer authorities, Facebook and, more significantly, Twitter, have only partially addressed important issues about their liability and about how users are informed of possible content removal or contract termination.

When it comes to the "notice and action procedure" used by consumer protection authorities to report and request the removal of illegal content, the changes by some companies are insufficient. While Google+ has set up a protocol, including deadlines to deal with the requests, Facebook and Twitter have only agreed to provide a dedicated e-mail address that national authorities can use to notify infringements, without committing to deal with such requests within specific timeframes.

Following numerous complaints by consumers who had been targeted by fraud or scams when using these websites, as well as having been subject to certain terms of services that do not respect EU consumer law, an enforcement action was launched in November 2016.

Since then, social media operators specifically agreed to amend:

- the terms of services limiting or totally excluding the liability of social media networks in connection with the performance of the service;
- the terms requiring consumers to waive mandatory EU consumer rights, such as their right to withdraw from an on-line purchase;
- the terms depriving consumers of their right to go to court in their Member State of residence, and providing the application of California law;
- the term releasing the platform from the duty to identify commercial communications and sponsored content.

The companies committed to implement the changes to their terms in all language versions in the first quarter of 2018.

Next steps

As already stated in its Communication on tackling illegal content online published in September 2017, the Commission expects online platforms to swiftly and proactively detect, remove and prevent the re-appearance of illegal content online. The Commission is currently working on the follow-up actions to this Communication.

The national consumer authorities and the Commission will monitor the implementation of the promised changes and will actively use the notice and action procedure provided by the companies. They will focus on illegal commercial content concerning unwanted subscriptions and other scams. Moreover, authorities may take action including enforcement measures where necessary.

The Commission will present in April a 'New Deal for Consumers'. This reform will propose to modernise the existing consumer law and ensure that they are properly enforced.

Background

On 16 March 2017, EU consumer authorities and the European Commission met with the companies to hear and discuss their proposed solutions. Following this meeting, the companies have made certain changes to their terms and conditions. However, the Commission and consumer authorities consider that further changes have to be made urgently (see press release).

The Consumer Protection Cooperation authorities, under the lead of the French Directorate General for Competition Policy, Consumer Affairs and Fraud Control (DGCCRF), sent a common position to Facebook, Twitter and Google+ in November 2016 asking them to improve a number of contract terms and set up a system to tackle illegal commercial content upon notification[1].

The EU Consumer Protection Cooperation (CPC) Regulation link national consumer authorities in a pan-European enforcement network. Thanks to this framework, a national authority in one EU country can call on their counterpart in another EU country to ask them to intervene in case of a cross-border infringement of EU consumer rules. Cooperation is common to various consumer-related pieces of legislation, such as the Unfair Commercial Practices Directive, the E-commerce Directive, the Consumer Rights Directive or the Unfair Contract Terms Directive.

Under the CPC framework, authorities regularly review issues of common concern for consumer protection in the Single Market and coordinate their market surveillance and potential enforcement actions. The Commission facilitates the exchange of information among authorities and their coordination.

Online platforms need to take greater responsibility in content governance. The Communication provides common tools to swiftly and proactively detect, remove and prevent illegal content online from reappearing.

For more information

Table with the changes to the terms and conditions

[1] Please note that any assessment made in this action is without prejudice to any future assessment of compliance of the contract terms by CPC authorities or in judicial proceedings.

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Greece, Spain and Portugal following natural disasters

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Commissioner for Regional policy Corina **Creţu** said: *"In Portugal, in Spain, and from the Greek island of Lesbos far off in the Aegean sea to the French Outermost regions in the Caribbean, the EU leaves no one alone in the face of tragedy. Once again the Solidarity Fund shows the EU's unfailing support for reconstruction works following natural disasters and for helping rebuilding people's lives."*

The €104 million is divided as follows:

€50.6 million for Portugal and €3.2 million for Spain following all the forest fires of the summer and October

Violent forest fires ravaged the central and Northern regions of Portugal, claiming many human lives and overwhelming firefighting and rescue services. The neighbouring Spanish region of Galicia was also affected.

The EU channelled emergency support via its Civil Protection Mechanism and Copernicus satellite service and later on, assisted financially by offering flexibility under EU funds programmes; in August 2017, €45 million from Cohesion Policy funds under the Centro regional programme was redirected towards helping local businesses affected by the fires and restoring public infrastructure. The Continente rural development programme was then modified to increase the amount dedicated to forest fire prevention by €22 million.

The EU also gave a first disbursement of aid worth €1.5 million from the EU Solidarity Fund to Portugal in November 2017.

€49 million for the French regions of Saint-Martin and Guadeloupe, after hurricanes Irma and Maria

The two European Outermost regions were hit by devastating hurricanes in September 2017; Saint-Martin was particularly affected. The money will contribute to putting the two regions back on their feet, while the Commission is looking at ways to protect further these regions from the effects of climate change, in line with its New Strategy for the Outermost regions.

The Commission is also currently seeking to help Saint-Martin and the Dutch part of the island, Sint-Maarten, recover together with the support of European funds, especially under their interregional cooperation programme.

The €49 million includes a €5 million advance paid out in December 2017.

€1.3 million for the Greek island of Lesbos after the June 2017 earthquake

An earthquake and its aftershocks hit the Greek island of Lesbos in June 2017. The country already received a first disbursement of aid worth almost €136,000 in October 2017.

Background

When a Member State is hit by a natural disaster, the EU first gives a helping hand with its emergency response instruments – and intends to step up its assistance with a proposal for a new European system to tackle natural disasters,RescEU – and then with financial aid for reconstruction in the longer term.

This Commission proposal for EU Solidarity Fund assistance has to be approved by the European Parliament and Council. The funding will reach the Member States shortly afterwards.

More information

EU Solidarity Fund

Factsheet – How is EU Solidarity Fund aid calculated?

The EU Solidarity Fund in Portugal

The EU Solidarity Fund in Spain

The EU Solidarity Fund in France

The EU Solidarity Fund in Greece

EU Solidarity Fund interventions since 2002

@EU_Regional@CorinaCretuEU

Future EU budget: Undermining Cohesion Policy risks undermining Europe’s future

CoR calls on EU Member States to express support for a strong Cohesion policy for all regions at next European Council

The President of the European Committee of the Regions, Karl-Heinz Lambertz, warned today that EU cohesion funds must not be cut and must continue to be made available for all regions and cities if the European Union wanted a more united, inclusive, greener and prosperous future. President Lambertz was reacting to a document released today by the European Commission which sets out options for the EU budget post-2020, and includes significant reductions of the funds for EU cohesion policy.

Referring to statements made by the European Council and the **European Commission** which recognise the added value of cohesion policy, and more recently support shown by the **Portuguese** , **Italian** and **German** governments, **President Lambertz**, said: " *The next EU budget will define the future of the European Union. As the EU's main investment and solidarity tool, cohesion policy creates jobs, supports SMEs, fosters innovation and tackles climate change. Undermining cohesion would undermine the future unity of an EU of 27. The EU's* ***Rome Declaration*** *made only last year supports a Europe that allows every level of government, including local and regional authorities, to strengthen "Europe's innovation and growth" potential. The European Council and Commission openly recognise the positive impact cohesion policy has had, which is why the next EU budget must continue to invest the same amount that it currently received in the current programming period – 34.2%* ".

With discussions on the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) – which sets out the annual expenditure ceilings for all EU policies for 2021-2027 – on the agenda of the next informal EU Council meeting (23 February) and with the European Commission's proposal expected on 2 May, local and regional governments are concerned that new priorities, such as security and migration, will trigger a reduction in cohesion policy.

President Lambertz reiterated a recent call by the European Committee of the Regions – the EU's assembly of 350 local and regional leaders – that Member States should increase their contributions to the next EU budget from 1.1% to 1.3% of the Gross National Income, a position shared by the European Parliament. " *If we want a Europe of ambition, we need a budget of ambition. The EU should be doing more with more: we will never achieve a truly social, inclusive and greener Europe that improves the lives of every citizen unless Member States contribute more to the EU purse. Europe's future now lies in the hands of the leaders of the EU27. We hope that they create a people's budget that is effective, flexible and ambitious to allow Europe to respond to the challenges of today and overcome the challenges of tomorrow* ", added the President.

To make the case for a strong cohesion policy for all regions and cities after 2020, the Committee together with leading EU associations representing regions and cities launched the **#CohesionAlliance** : a grass-roots movement open to anyone who believes that EU cohesion policy must continue to be a pillar of the EU's future. Since its launch in October last year, the Alliance has attracted nearly 3000 signatories, including regional and local authorities, Members of the European Parliament, EU ministers, business associations, academia, trade unions and think tanks.

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ESMA launches Interactive Single Rulebook

The European Securities and Markets Authority (ESMA) is launching its Interactive Single Rulebook, which is a new service for market participants and other interested stakeholders across the European Union. The tool is launched today with the Level 1 text of the UCITS Directive, and links to all relevant Level 2 and Level 3 measures already available elsewhere on ESMA's website.

ESMA, in publishing this Interactive Single Rulebook, aims to facilitate the consistent application of the EU single rulebook for securities markets area. The new on-line tool provides, for Directives or Regulations in ESMA's remit, a comprehensive overview of all implementing or delegated acts, guidelines, opinions and Q&As.

Next steps

ESMA's objective is to provide an interactive version for each key level 1 text under ESMA's remit incrementally, with the next texts being the Credit Rating Agencies Regulation and MiFID II/MiFIR.