

Statement by Commissioner Vestager – Commission simplifies rules for public investment in ports and airports, culture and the outermost regions

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Today, the Commission has exempted public support measures in a number of areas from prior Commission state aid control. This facilitates public investments in key infrastructure, namely ports and existing airports, but also public support for culture, multi-purpose sport arenas and the EU's outermost regions.

But first, let me say just a few words on why this matters:

EU State aid rules ensure that companies can compete on equal terms in the EU Single Market to the benefit of European consumers. The EU Treaty gives the Commission the task of enforcing those rules.

Because fair competition is not just a question of what private companies do. We also have to look at what governments are doing – at how State-owned companies operate and at the subsidies that governments give.

That's why Member States are normally required to notify their plans for State aid to the Commission, and to go ahead only if the Commission gives its agreement.

This allows the Commission to prevent measures that distort competition, that hinder trade across national borders and undermine the EU Single Market. For example, if a Member State wants to give a better tax treatment to its national champion at the expense of more efficient competitors abroad.

At the same time, the vast majority of public support measures do not cause such problems. Either they are not State aid at all and fall outside the scope of EU State aid control. Or, they do amount to State aid but do not distort competition. They can all be implemented by Member States without having to ask the Commission for permission in advance.

It is important for Member States, companies and the citizens, to have clear guidance on this.

Today's changes are only the latest step in the Commission's recent efforts to modernise EU State aid control. The Commission has implemented several initiatives to stimulate investment by reducing the administrative burden for public authorities and companies and by increasing legal certainty for companies receiving aid.

To clarify what public measures are not State aid at all, in May last year the

Commission adopted a Notice on the Notion of State aid. This covers, for example, public investments in roads, inland waterways, rail, and water distribution networks.

We have also taken a series of decisions, which show that measures are not State aid where their impact is essentially local, without affecting competition and trade between Member States. For example, public investments in hospitals, old age homes, sports facilities and regional news media.

For public measures that are covered by EU State aid control, but do not harm competition, the Commission set out clear criteria in the "General Block Exemption Regulation". Member States can rely on these criteria to support investment in important areas such as energy, environment, broadband and innovation. And this without asking the Commission's approval first. This Regulation already exempts about 95% of all State aid measures – that's around 28 billion euros in State aid per year.

This reduces the administrative burden for Member States and increases legal certainty for companies that receive State aid. Of course, less control by the Commission requires Member States to themselves take responsibility: to show citizens where public funds go and what their impact is. Therefore, cooperation between Member States and the Commission is key to make modernisation of State aid control a success.

And today, we are giving flexibility to Member States to grant State aid directly, without asking the Commission's approval first, in a number of additional, important sectors – setting out clear criteria to make sure the aid does not distort competition.

The main changes relate to ports and existing airports. Over the past few years the Commission has taken more than 30 State aid decisions on ports and more than 50 State aid decisions on airports. So, we now have a good idea of which measures are likely to distort competition and which are not. We also consulted the public twice and took on board the feedback we received.

In particular, the new provisions exempt from prior control by the Commission public investments in existing **regional airports**. As long as they serve less than 3 million passengers per year. There are more than 420 airports of this size in the EU – they account for more than 80% of all airports in the EU but only about 13% of air traffic. These airports will be able to receive aid to maintain and upgrade their infrastructures, if they respect the criteria in the Regulation.

For small existing airports, the Regulation also allows Member States to help cover operating costs. By small airports I mean those handling less than 200 000 passengers per year. These may not always be as profitable as larger airports, but they can play an important role for the connectivity of a region and are unlikely to have much effect on competition. Airports of this size account for almost half of all EU airports but less than 1% of air traffic. Therefore, it should be up to the relevant region – and its citizens – to decide if they want to spend public funds to support these small airports.

For **ports**, the Regulation now exempts investments by Member States of up to 150 million euros in seaports and up to 50 million euros in inland ports. This includes dredging costs that certain ports need to incur to keep the waterway deep enough for ships to dock. For ports these costs are non-negotiable because of their geography, regardless of how efficient and competitive they are.

So, these are significant changes for public investments in ports and airports, which clarify the rules, simplify procedures and allow Member States to invest in these sectors more quickly. This can help create jobs and spur economic growth, whilst preserving competition in Europe's Single Market.

We have also simplified EU State aid control in some other areas, namely **culture and multi-purpose sports arenas**. Support in these areas often does not amount to State aid anyway, as we clarified in the Notice on the Notion of State aid. Only a few large size projects are – and for these, in future even fewer projects will need to be notified to the Commission for approval.

We have also made it simpler for public authorities to compensate companies for additional costs they face in the EU's outermost regions and sparsely populated areas. These regions often face significant economic challenges because they are remote and dependent on a few traded products. EU State aid rules allow support for these regions to meet those challenges.

Furthermore, in addition to the important existing exemptions under the General Block Exemption Regulation to support innovation, we have clarified today that Member States can support projects with a so-called "Seal of Excellence" quality label. These are innovation projects funded by Member States that also meet the conditions for funding under the EU Horizon 2020 instrument. Today's clarification helps ensuring that these projects can be implemented as quickly as possible. This can especially benefit SMEs.

Finally, we addressed another issue that is at the heart of fair competition in the Single Market: EU state aid rules do not allow Member States to use state aid to incentivise the relocation of jobs from one EU country to another. Today's changes add safeguards to ensure that the rules work well in practice.

From now on, to benefit from the procedural speed of the General Block Exemption Regulation, the company benefitting from investment aid has to confirm that it did not relocate this activity from elsewhere in the EU. And will also not do so in the future.

The point of all this, of course, is to facilitate public investments that serve citizens while preserving competition. To make it easier to grant aid on clear and simple conditions that contributes to our common goals on jobs & growth, climate, innovation and social cohesion.

This is also at the heart of the Juncker Commission's Better Regulation agenda, which is led by my colleague Frans Timmermans.

Our objective is to focus the Commission's action on those issues that really matter to people, taking European action only where it is necessary and leaving the Member States to take responsibility for everything else.

Similarly, when it comes to state aid policy what we want to ensure is that responsibility for public measures is taken at the appropriate level – by the Commission, if it genuinely affects competition and European consumers across borders, and by national authorities, if the effect is local.

We have to work together to make sure that the Commission can be “big on big things and small on small things” to the benefit of EU citizens and companies.

Statement by Federica Mogherini and Commissioner Johannes Hahn on the mandate given to Zoran Zaev to form the government of the

We welcome the decision of President Ivanov to give the mandate to form a government to Mr. Zaev as an important step in the process of government formation. We hope that this constructive spirit will continue to prevail so that the country can finally come out of the political crisis. We expect now a swift formation of the government committed to implementing all parts of the Przino agreement and the Urgent Reform Priorities.

We call on all parliamentary parties to put their divisions aside and work jointly on a common reform agenda, to bring the country back on its Euro-Atlantic integration path. This is what the people want and deserve.

We stand ready to support the new government in its reform efforts.

Spokesperson's statement on allegations of misconduct by a humanitarian partner organisation in

Greece, on behalf of Commissioner for Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Management Christos Stylianides

The European Commission has in place a thorough mechanism to monitor and ensure that its humanitarian funding worldwide is implemented in full respect of all humanitarian principles and sound financial management.

Through this mechanism we have identified potentially serious allegations related to one of the humanitarian projects being implemented by a partner in Greece.

An allegation relates to a case of potential sexual exploitation of beneficiaries by the partner's staff members. Another allegation concerns potential financial corruption by these staff members.

Although these remain allegations under investigation, the Commission is taking them very seriously. We take a zero tolerance approach to any abuse of the rights and personal integrity of all refugees and migrants as well as to any misuse of funds.

Our primary concern is the welfare of the potential victims. Accordingly, we shall ensure that immediate support is provided to them.

We have already informed the Greek authorities and submitted the case to OLAF, the EU's anti-fraud office for immediate investigation.

Steps are being taken to suspend payments to the partner until the investigation is concluded.

High Representative Federica Mogherini announces senior nominations

Federica Mogherini, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the European Commission, announced today the nomination of 41 new Heads of EU Delegations^[1].

Pierre MAYAUDON has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Afghanistan. He is currently serving as Head of the EU Delegation to Bangladesh.

Aude MAIO-COLICHE has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to

Argentina. She is currently serving as Head of the EU Delegation to Venezuela.

Michael PULCH has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Australia. He is currently serving as Head of the EU Delegation to Singapore.

Rensje TEERINK has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Bangladesh. She is currently serving as Head of the EU Delegation to Nepal.

Oliver NETTE has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Benin. He is currently serving as Head of Unit, Foreign Policy Instruments (FPI) in the European Commission.

Hans-Peter SCHADEK has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Cameroon. He is currently serving as the Head of Division for West Africa within the EEAS.

Peteris USTUBS has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Canada. He is currently serving as a member of Cabinet of the High Representative/Vice-President of the European Commission, Federica Mogherini.

Sofia MOREIRA DE SOUSA has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Cabo Verde. She is currently serving as Deputy Head of the EU Delegation to South Africa.

Samuela ISOPI has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to the Central African Republic. She is currently serving as the Ambassador of Italy to Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad and Equatorial Guinea.

Alberto NAVARRO GONZALEZ has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Cuba. He is currently serving as Head of the EU Delegation to the Dominican Republic.

Gianluca GRIPPA has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to the Dominican Republic. He is currently serving as Head of Division for Strategy and Instruments of the European Neighbourhood Policy within the EEAS.

Andres BASSOLS SOLDEVILA has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to El Salvador. He is currently serving as Deputy Head of Division for Regional Affairs Americas within the EEAS and as Chair of the Council Working Party on Latin America and the Caribbean (COLAC).

Johan BORGSTAM has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Ethiopia. He is currently serving as Ambassador of Sweden to Kenya.

Julian WILSON has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to the Pacific Region, based in Fiji. He is currently serving as Head of Division for Japan, Korea, Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific within the EEAS.

Alessandro PALMERO has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Honduras. He is currently serving as Head of the EU Delegation to Paraguay.

Michael MANN has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Iceland. He is currently serving as Head of Division for Strategic Communications within the EEAS.

Ramon BLECUA has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Iraq. He is currently serving as Head of Political Section in the EU Delegation to Yemen.

Emanuele GIAUFRET has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Israel. He is currently serving as Head of Division for Democracy and Electoral Observation within the EEAS.

Boris IAROCHEVITCH has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to the Kyrgyz Republic. He is currently serving as Head of Division for Eastern Partnership, Regional Cooperation and OSCE within the EEAS.

Christian MANAHL has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Lesotho. He is currently serving as Head of the EU Delegation to Eritrea.

Hélène CAVE has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Liberia. She is currently serving as Advisor to the Managing Director for Africa within the EEAS.

Giacomo DURAZZO has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Mauritania. He is currently serving as Advisor for Development Cooperation Coordination within the EEAS.

Klaus RUDISCHHAUSER has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Mexico. He is currently serving as Deputy Director General for International Cooperation and Development (DEVCO) in the European Commission.

Peter MICHALKO has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Moldova. He is currently serving as Ambassador of the Slovak Republic to the Hellenic Republic.

Claudia WIEDEY has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Morocco. She is currently serving as Head of Division for the Horn of Africa, East Africa and Indian Ocean within the EEAS.

Kristian SCHMIDT has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Myanmar. He is currently serving as Head of the EU Delegation to Uganda.

Ketil KARLSEN has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Nigeria. He is currently serving as Head of the EU Delegation to Honduras.

Thierry BECHET has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Norway. He is currently serving as Deputy Head of the EU Delegation to the International Organisations in Vienna and as EU Permanent Representative to the OSCE.

Paolo BERIZZI has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Paraguay. He is currently serving as a member of Cabinet of the Commissioner for International Cooperation and Development, Neven Mimica.

Diego MELLADO has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Peru. He is

currently serving as Head of Division for Selection and Recruitment within the EEAS.

Markus EDERER has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Russia. He is currently serving as State Secretary of the Foreign Office of the Federal Republic of Germany.

Nicola BELLOMO has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Rwanda. He is currently serving as Head of the EU Delegation to Swaziland.

Sem FABRIZI has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Serbia. He is currently serving as Head of the EU Delegation to Australia.

Tom VENS has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Sierra Leone. He is currently serving as Head of Political Section in the EU Delegation to Somalia.

Barbara PLINKERT has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Singapore. She is currently serving as Head of Division for HQ Security and EEAS Security Policy within the EEAS.

Esmeralda HERNANDEZ ARAGONES has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Swaziland. She is currently serving as Desk Officer for Southern Africa within the EEAS and has formerly served as Chargé d'Affaires to the Gambia and to Suriname.

Pirkka TAPIOLA has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Thailand. He is currently serving as Head of the EU Delegation to Moldova.

Maria Cristina MARTINS BARREIRA has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Togo. She is currently serving as Head of Division for Horizontal Coordination of the EU Military Staff within the EEAS.

Attilio PACIFICI has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Uganda. He is currently serving as Advisor to the Managing Director for Africa within the EEAS.

Karl-Otto KÖNIG has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Uruguay. He is currently serving as Ambassador of Germany to Panama.

Isabel BRILHANTE PEDROSA has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Venezuela. She is currently serving as Ambassador of Portugal to Namibia.

^[1] They will be formally appointed after the receipt of the agréments.

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Remarks by High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini on the EU Strategy on Syria during the plenary session of the

Check against delivery!

Thank you very much.

I am particularly glad we have the opportunity to share in this hemicycle again the work we are doing on Syria, especially today as the UN has reconvened the talks; the intra-Syrian talks in Geneva just started this morning. I just spoke a couple of hours ago with Staffan de Mistura again, the UN Special Envoy [for Syria] who has concluded this morning the first renewed round of talks with the Syrian parties aiming at entering into the substance of the political transition, including on constitutional set-up. This is the process on which and in which the European Union is investing, supporting the intra-Syrian talks, the UN facilitation and the work of the Syrian opposition, the civil society, especially the women of Syria – work that we support every day with our teams, both in Geneva and in Brussels, but also in the region.

So, the European Union has a special role to play, to help the Syrian people end the war in their country. The European Union is not a military actor in Syria – I know some might argue that this makes us a less powerful player in the region. Even if, as you know well, I always value a lot whenever we manage or we decide to use also our hard power in some situations that require this, I strongly believe that the fact that we are not a military player in the Syrian crisis makes us stronger in the political context of trying to solve the problem and the crisis there.

Because we have not taken part in the devastation of the country, and at the same time we have been on the side of the civilian population, all throughout the war, as the first humanitarian donor for Syrians both within and outside of the country. Exactly for this reason we have a stronger role to play when it comes to the political mediation and solution.

First of all, let me stress one basic thing that sometimes we take for granted, but I think in these times we are living, it is definitely not something that is irrelevant: we are the ones contributing to the humanitarian work inside Syria and around Syria. We are the ones bringing aid through the UN agencies and international organisations; trying to save every single life; trying to bring every single child to school; trying to guarantee the minimum basic living conditions for Syrians.

This is something I will always be proud of. Some might consider that *realpolitik* goes as far as making this irrelevant. Let me tell you the basic condition not only of humanity from my perspective, but also for the political future of Syria, is that there are some Syrians left. I am sorry, this is very hard to say but our work of saving lives on the ground, guaranteeing that people have humanitarian aid, medical assistance, food, water – basic, basic living conditions – is first a humanitarian duty, and second is also a major political asset also to be a recognised, trusted political actor for the parties. It is precious, so much precious that to me it is invaluable.

Because we have not destroyed, because we help people's daily life, we can better help the Syrians rebuild the future of the country. And this is something that not only the international community, not only the region, but also and first of all the Syrians recognise to the European Union. This is the core of the European Union's Strategy on Syria – adopted by the Council on the 3rd of April, with Conclusions endorsing my joint communication with the Commission [Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council – Elements for an EU Strategy for Syria]. This is our answer to anyone who believes – as I was saying – that we are powerless because we are not shooting. It is exactly the contrary. The entire European Union is united behind the goal of a political solution to the war, and the means to achieve it. It demonstrates what we can do in practice to end this war and ensure that lives are protected, rights respected, democratic aspirations and needs are met.

In the Strategy we outlined a clear set of objectives: seeking a political solution to the conflict within the UN framework, supporting the opposition – including the High Negotiation Committee – to develop their proposal for a meaningful and inclusive transition, and in parallel – as I said – working to save lives, to promote human rights, to strengthen civil society, the role of women, to promote accountability for war crimes – extremely important, I will come back to that – and to support the resilience of the Syrian people.

The Strategy indicates the direction of our actions; it is not a philosophical paper; it is a roadmap for acting together. Two days after it was endorsed, we have begun to put it in practice, hosting the major Ministerial conference on Syria in Brussels, together with the Secretary General of the United Nations. We brought together 80 delegations from countries and international organisations from the region and the entire world, raising more than 9 billion euros until 2020, including 5.6 billion euros for 2017 alone. There was a risk of the international community being disrupted; of having a sort of donors' *fatigue* when it comes to the support to Syrians and I was glad to see that we managed to mobilise more resources than last year in London [Supporting Syria and the Region – London 2016]. This is important, it makes a difference to the lives of the people on the ground. But again – as I said – it makes a difference also for the UN and our support to the UN system, another political objective we have very deep in our hearts and minds in this period of time and it strengthens the possibility for a political work to be done in Geneva.

More than two thirds of this amount comes from the European Union and the

Member States. So, once again, we are throwing a lifeline to millions of Syrians, inside the country and in the region, building in this way the basic conditions for the future of Syria, the survival of Syrians.

As you might remember, on the eve of the Brussels Conference, a terrible chemical attack hit Idlib's province and I do not believe this was a complete coincidence. Normally, as the international community gathers to work for peace and show unity, and determination and commitment, the enemies of peace tried to derail its efforts.

But that very same day, from Brussels, from the European Union, from the UN, from so many countries and organisations, we sent two powerful messages. First, we all agreed that those responsible for these crimes must be held accountable. And last week, exactly one week ago, on Europe's Day, the 9th of May, in New York, I was briefing the UN Security Council and sharing with them the fact that the European Union fully stands behind the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons in its investigations: this is the right forum to document any responsibilities for the use of chemical weapons in Syria. The Brussels Conference also made a call for support to the new "International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism," established by the UN General Assembly, which will assist in investigating and prosecuting war crimes cases in Syria. Accountability for us is key.

Second, in Brussels we all committed to work for a political solution agreed among the Syrian parties as the only just but also the only realistic way to end the war.

Accountability and the need to support a political solution and to be serious about that: these were also the main messages we heard from the representatives of the Syrian civil society, Syrian women, during the Brussels Conference. We heard a very powerful word from them: *hudna, hudna, hudna*. They were repeating it to us, and this means "we need a ceasefire". We need violence to decrease and peace to reach some areas of the country. For three days, around the Brussels Conference, over 40 Syrians from all parts of Syria and from the diaspora, representatives of civil society organisations with very different backgrounds, women and men, different ages, worked to agree on a set of common messages for the Conference. Their representatives delivered their messages to the ministers in the political session. We have immediately turned the Strategy's recognition of the civil society's crucial role into practice and I know this Parliament is particularly supportive of that, rightly so. These are the people who can reach across the conflict lines, talk to each other, heal the wounds of over six years of war, to make reconciliation truly possible on the ground, locally. And the expertise they hold will also be essential to post-conflict reconstruction.

In fact, let me say the Syrians who came to Brussels from within and outside of Syria, different parts of the country, agreed very much with our determination to begin preparations for the day after the end of the conflict. Because too many times – too many times – the international community – and also Europe – was not prepared for *winning the peace* after a war had ended. It is a mistake that we cannot afford anymore, Syria and the Syrians cannot afford that mistake. Of course, reconstruction will only begin

when a political transition will be under way, not before. This is in the hands of the Syrian talks in Geneva under the UN auspices that the European Union is accompanying day by day. But the European Union has already started to engage and to contribute to the post-agreement planning in close cooperation with the United Nations and the World Bank. Also because this can be a very powerful tool, maybe one of the most powerful tools today, to support and accompany the political process, showing the peace dividend, being an incentive to the Syrian parties to find and implement an agreement.

The same logic marks our Syria Strategy: we don't try to bet on the future, but to prepare for it and contribute to shaping it, together with the UN, together with the powers of the region, but most of all, with the people of Syria. Because peace can only come from the Syrian people, from a political solution agreed by the Syrian parties.

This is the most complex and the most violent conflict in our times and it is clear to all in the world that no regional or global power alone has the strength to solve it. We need forces to join along one line, which is a political solution agreed by the Syrian parties in Geneva under the UN auspices.

All different initiatives – and we wish that all of them manage to deliver and to be implemented, including the ones taken in Astana – now have the big responsibility to converge towards Geneva, to help the Syrians build peace and find their own path towards national reconciliation. And there are no shortcuts for that. We have seen it for six years: Geneva, the UN process, the multilateral framework, these intra-Syrian talks is and must remain the only way to transition.

As I said today, Staffan de Mistura has resumed the talks with a clear intention of entering into the substance of the transition, starting from the constitutional set-up of the country. The European Union stands there in Geneva, as well as the work we do in Brussels and in the region, to accompany the UN, their work, to accompany the Syrian people for a democratic, united and inclusive Syria to finally bring peace to the country and to our entire region.

Thank you.