

Commission unveils its vision for a modern single market for all

The European Commission has set out a package of initiatives to modernise the European single market and to bring more benefits to Europeans, building on past successes. The single market has already helped create competitive companies, reduced prices, more choice for consumers and a Europe attractive for investors. The Commission's measures are based on extensive consultation. They will ensure that the single market does even more to take advantage of globalisation, empower consumers, open up for small businesses, stimulate innovation and help maintain high social and environmental standards. Among the most important policy actions set out in the single market package adopted by the Commission today are initiatives to: help consumers to exercise their contractual rights and get redress across borders; provide better information for consumers and small businesses; respond to weaknesses in sectors where the single market should deliver more; propose a Small Business Act; and introduce a "researcher passport"; clarify how EU rules apply to services and social services of general interest; and promote the quality of social services across the EU

Commission President José Manuel Barroso said: "Today's package puts consumers and small businesses first. It marks the start of a new cycle for the single market. We need to make the strong base we already have work even better. So we aim to empower consumers and small businesses through initiatives like the consumer scoreboard, the Small Business Act and the 'single market assistance service'. We will act to remove bottlenecks where single market benefits are not being fully passed on to customers, as we have done in the mobile phone roaming market. A single market for all means a strong social dimension, which is why we are also presenting today the Commission's social vision and a specific way forward on services and social services of general interest. This balanced package will mean a single market that does more to boost Europe's response to globalisation, to create growth and jobs, to ensure fair prices and to contribute to social and environmental protection."

Empowering consumers

The Commission wants to give consumers more rights and information, for their own benefit and to drive competitiveness and innovation. For example, it will propose in December improved food labelling rules. It will present in 2008 initiatives on consumer contractual rights and on collective redress - allowing a group of people from across the EU who have the same complaint about the same company to come together to pursue it. Measures to improve market surveillance for medicines and information on pharmaceuticals will be brought forward. The Commission will make proposals to further integrate retail financial services markets, to improve consumers' financial literacy and to facilitate switching bank accounts without a closing fee.

Making globalisation deliver for all Europeans

The Commission is determined that the benefits of globalisation cannot be "creamed off" by vested interests with disproportionate market power but reach all European citizens.

So the Commission will take action where markets do not deliver for consumers. The example of textiles has shown that the benefits of trade opening are not always passed on to end consumers due to bottlenecks and lack of competition. The Commission will examine a range of sectors in more detail and propose policies for markets not functioning effectively.

The Commission's package sets out how, in a globalised world, Europe can build on the single market's achievements by negotiating with third countries to achieve open markets and regulatory convergence, based on European practices where those work best.

Small Business Act for Europe

The Commission will propose a Small Business Act in 2008. It will aim to cut red tape, increase SMEs' access to European programmes, increase their share of public procurement contracts and reduce obstacles to cross border activity, including through a European small company statute. The Commission will examine how taxation policies affect SME growth.

Knowledge and innovation in the single market

A new standardisation strategy will aim to help the results of R&D to find their way to markets and to boost take up of energy saving technologies. Building on the electronic communications package presented last week (see IP/07/1677), a flagship of the new single market, the Commission will in 2008 present initiatives on universal service and on the interoperability of e-government systems. The Commission will seek progress on common EU patent protection and propose a "researcher passport" to boost mobility of researchers.

Better day-to-day management of the single market

The revised Community Lisbon Programme, announced with December's mid-term Strategic Report on the 2005-10 Growth and Jobs Strategy, will reflect single market priorities even more fully than in the past. Member States will be asked to include in their annual reports on the Lisbon Strategy information on the functioning of the single market.

The Commission will work with senior national officials to identify the best ways to help Member States implement and enforce EU policies, for instance through "single market centres" at national level. The Commission will vigorously pursue infringement cases where appropriate, while assisting the SOLVIT network which solves 80% of cases referred to it without judicial process.

The Commission has initiated a pilot project of "single market ambassadors" who will begin by visiting the Commission's Representations in Member States to explain today's package to stakeholders and to national and local media. It is also setting up a new one-stop "single market assistance service" for citizens and businesses.

The Single Market Scoreboard (see IP/07/991) will from 2008 monitor the overall performance of the single market, rather than focusing on transposition delays and infringement cases, and also include a "consumer scoreboard" on the performance of consumer markets.

The social dimension

The single market has always had a strong social dimension. Its success has gone hand in hand with solidarity and cohesion.

Today's package includes the Commission's social vision, for a rapidly changing 21st century Europe. It sets out how in a globalised age, all Europe's citizens must have access to resources improving their "life chances" and enabling them to share in rising prosperity.

The Commission's social vision identifies the need for investment in a number of areas, primarily by Member States but with Europe contributing in various ways. Those areas include: youth; career opportunities; longer and healthier lives; gender equality; inclusion and non-discrimination; mobility and integration; culture, participation and dialogue

The social vision enriches the Commission's "Social Reality Stocktaking" consultation, which is open until 15 February 2008. It will feed into a renewed Social Agenda, which the Commission will present in mid-2008. For more details, see MEMO 07/475

Services of general interest

The package also includes a Communication on services of general interest, including social services of general interest. It highlights the role of the Protocol to the draft Lisbon Treaty on services of general interest, which provides political visibility to these services.

Moreover, the Communication includes initiatives aimed at clarifying the implementation of Community rules, in particular state aid and public procurement, and at helping public authorities, service providers and users to better understand and apply these rules.

In essence, EU internal market and competition rules apply to services of general economic interest - those provided for remuneration such as telecommunications, energy, transport and postal services. But those rules are applied taking into account the specificities of such services, so as not to hinder effective delivery. Non-economic services of general interest such as police, justice and basic social security are not covered by such rules. This clarification exercise puts a particular emphasis on social services. (For more details see MEMO/07/475).

The Communication also proposes a strategy promoting the quality of social services, such as social housing, childcare, support for families and persons in need. This communication follow up on a previous White Paper and large public consultation. It draws also on the European Parliaments contribution to the debate. But, most of all it develops the set of principals establish in a specific Protocol on services of general interests attached to the Treaty to Lisbon. This is a major innovation and provides a sound basis for the definition of services of general interests. The Commission intends to move from debate to action, providing practical reforms to specific questions. The purpose is to preserve the social role of services of general interests and promote their quality and affordability, in order to improve the quality of life of citizens.

The environmental dimension

Europe's experience in protecting the environment and beginning to build a low-carbon economy has influenced global approaches and generated new European and export markets for environmentally friendly goods and services. Continued attention is needed in the single market to ensure that market prices reflect the true costs of goods and services to society. This pursuit of sustainability is a driver of innovation and an investment for future generations.

Background

With the lead policy document "A Single Market for 21st Century Europe," the package includes: a round-up of the single market's achievements (for key statistics, see MEMO 07/475); a paper on how better management and governance can deliver a better single market; a paper on the external dimension (how the single market can enhance Europe's global influence); a paper on improving monitoring of key markets and sectors; and policy documents on services of general interest including social services of general interest and a social vision for Europe (see MEMO 07/475)

In its May 2006 Communication "A Citizens' Agenda: Delivering a Europe of Results" the Commission announced an extensive review of the single market. It presented an interim report to EU leaders at the March 2007 European Council, which asked the Commission for an "ambitious and comprehensive" package. New single market priorities are expected to be agreed at the 2008 Spring Summit.

The full text of the documents in the single market package will be made available via:

http://ec.europa.eu/citizens_agenda/