# Eurofocus

***NEWS ITEMS OF GENERAL INTEREST***

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*Articles of immediate interest to readers, ready for publication.*

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## REGIONAL AND SOCIAL AID - The EU will spend EUR 213 billion between 2000 and 2006...

**...on helping its poorest regions and the jobless.**

The European Union's poorest regions can continue to look forward to improvements to their road and rail networks, for example, and the unemployed in all EU countries to help with upgrading their skills. The EU Council of Ministers recently adopted a new system of European regional and social aid, under which a sum of EUR 213 billion* in all will be made available from the EU budget, between 2000 and 2006, to help the most disadvantaged regions modernize their economies and the unemployed to return to work.

The EU's present system of regional and social aid comes to an end this December 31. Last March the heads of state or government of the 15 member states reached agreement on the contents of the system to come into force on January 1. These have now been embodied in detail in the texts of nine EU regulations.

The European Regional and Social Funds, the EU's main aid instrument, will have at their disposal EUR 195 billion in all from 2000 to 2006. More than two-thirds of this sum will go to the most disadvantaged regions - those whose gross domestic product (GDP) per head is still below 75% of the EU average - and to the less densely populated regions of northern Finland and Sweden.

Regions which are somewhat richer, but have been hard hit by unemployment or by a population exodous, will receive 11.5% of the total to help pay for their redevelopment. They include industrial, urban and rural areas, as well as regions dependent on fishing. The remaining 12.3% will be used to improve education, training and job finding methods throughout the EU. Priority will be given to the regions and countries which are suffering the most from unemployment and social exclusion.

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In order to continue to help the four EU countries which are less well-off - Ireland, Greece, Portugal and Spain - develop their transport systems and improve environmental protection, EUR 18 billion is being allocated to a special fund, the Cohesion Fund.

As before, some of the aid will go to projects which can serve as an example to the rest of the EU. They will be grouped together in four "initiatives:" INTERREG, which covers border areas; EQUAL, which is designed to combat discrimination in access to jobs; LEADER, which specializes in rural development and URBAN, whose aim is the rebirth of rundown urban areas.

* 1 EUR = UK £0.65 or IR £0.79.

## WORKING TIME - Seafarers to be guaranteed minimum rest periods

**An EU law makes an agreement between employers and trade unions compulsory.**

Seafarers working on sea-going vessels which are registered in a European Union (EU) country will soon be entitled to a minimum rest period of 10 hours in any 24-hour period, and 77 hours in any seven-day period. The EU Council of Ministers recently adopted a directive which embodies the contents of an agreement reached last autumn by the organization of European shipowners, on the one hand, and trade unions representing the maritime sector on the other.

EU member states have until 30 June 2002 to implement the directive. They can also do this by limiting the maximum number of working hours to 14 in any 24-hour period, and to 72 hours in any seven-day period. In addition, EU member states have the right to adopt or keep a system which is more favourable to seafarers at the national level.

This new directive is part of a series of measures designed to limit working time in the sectors of economic activity to which European standards do not apply so far, because of the special features of these sectors.

## TELECOMS - To make it easier to obtain lower prices and better service...

**...a European law now separates cable television from traditional networks.**

Cheaper telephone calls; cheaper, more rapid and reliable access to the Internet, and new ways of paying for a film from home, using your television or computer screen - these are the benefits on offer from the new information and telecommunications technologies, provided that the major telecom companies do not block these developments. The European Commission has taken the necessary steps, however, by recently adopting a European directive which separates cable television from the traditional telecom networks.

Thanks to the technological innovations of recent years, you can, in principle, surf the Internet and buy goods over it, at high speed, via your television or PC. Home banking allows you to use these devices to check your bank balance or make a bank transfer. In the same way you can choose a film, pay for it and watch it on your television or PC, without leaving home.

All these opportunities flow from the on-going convergence of technologies, which is making it possible to offer the same services over two networks which have been kept entirely separate so far - the telephone and cable television. The fact that you can now shop electronically, for example, by telephone or over the Internet should normally stimulate competition and bring down prices.

These developments pose problems, however, because some major telecom companies, which control access to the long-established telephone networks, are tempted to exercise control over cable networks also. This would keep prices high and could delay the implementation of technological innovations. Hence the adoption by the European Commission, with the approval of the European Parliament, of a directive which requires telecom companies which are in this situation to separate their traditional activites from those related to their cable networks, by putting them under separate companies.

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Of course the directive also prevents telecom companies from bringing together, within the same company, control over a traditional network, on the one hand, and a cable network on the other. The directive's impact should be all the greater given that cable networks are being set up in most EU countries, and can be accessed from a growing number of European homes. The need to separate the activities in question is regarded as the minimum likely to ensure that consumers benefit from technological progress in this field.

## RESEARCH - A new stage in the fight against mad cow disease

**The success of three BSE detection tests is verified by EU experts.**

It will soon be possible to detect more quickly and with greater precision animals suffering from mad cow disease - or bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), to give it its scientific name. Scientists working at one of the European Commission's laboratories recently established that three tests developed in Ireland, France and Switzerland make it possible to detect the disease within a period of four to 24 hours. A fourth test requires further work.

The evaluation of these tests was carried out in the framework of a consumer protection programme financed by the EU to the extent of some EUR one million*. The tests make it possible to distinguish animals clinically affected with BSE from healthy animals. It now remains to be seen if these tests are equally effective in the case of animals which, although affected with BSE, show no clinical signs of it.

* 1 EUR = UK £0.65 or IR £0.79.

## COMBATING DRUG ABUSE - A new synthetic substance is targeted

### A proposal for stricter measures throughout the European Union.

A new drug has appeared in Europe. It is already associated with five deaths, four of them in the UK and one in the Netherlands. A synthetic substance, like ecstasy, it is even more dangerous. It is called 4-MTA, an abbreviation for 4-Methylthioamphetamine, and it is a new amphetamine derivative. Young people are its main target. Two European Union (EU) countries, Germany and Sweden, have already banned its sale, and the European Commission proposed to the EU Council of Ministers at the end of June that the measure be extended to all member states.

Four of the five deaths associated with 4-MTA were of people who had taken another drug as well: alcohol, amphetamines, ecstasy or methadone. The fifth death was due to the new drug, acting on its own. An overdose of 4-MTA led to 10 people being hospitalized, five of them in the UK, five in Belgium. As the effects of this new substance are not felt quickly, there is a further temptation to increase the dose - and the risks associated with it.

4-MTA "has no therapeutic value and no industrial use, so it is clearly only intended for illicit distribution," the acting European Commissioner responsible for the coordination of drugs policies has pointed out. Meanwhile, trafficking of 4-MTA appears to be linked increasingly to other illegal substances, such as cannabis. The danger it represents is on a Europe-wide scale, of course.

Two years ago the EU Council of Ministers decided to organize an exchange of information on the new synthetic drugs between member states, and to carry out a joint assessment of the risks they pose, in order to be able to take the necessary measures. Alerted recently by the tragedies that have taken place in several EU countries, the European Monitoring Centre on Drugs and Drug Addiction brought together experts from the member states and the European Commission. Their risk assessment report has led to the proposal to monitor 4-MTA and ban its sale throughout the 15-nation Union.

## POPULATION - Smaller families and an ageing population

**Recent demographic trends in the European Union.**

The population of the present, 15-nation European Union (EU) should begin to fall by 2023, if current trends, including the tendency for Europeans to live longer, are confirmed. This is one of the findings of a recent statistical survey by Eurostat, the EU's statistical office, entitled "Living conditions in Europe." The first EU country to be effected by a decline in its population - as from 2008 - would be Italy, followed by Germany (from 2013 onwards) and Spain (from 2014). The last EU countries to face declining populations would be Greece (from 2038) and Portugal (from 2040).

The EU had a total population of 375 million in 1998. Germany was at one end of the spectrum, with 82 million inhabitants, and Luxembourg at the other, with just 424,000 inhabitants. In the EU as a whole, 21% of the population was 60 years and older in 1997.

European households are becoming smaller, as a result of a fall in birthrates, an increase in the number of divorces and changes in mentality. The average EU household consisted of 2.5 persons in 1997, down from 2.8 persons in 1981/82. Of every 100 European households in 1997, 55 consisted of families with one or more children, 19 of childless couples, 11 of people living on their own, 7 of one-parent families and 8 of such varied households as two brother or two sisters living under the same roof.

There are substantial differences from one EU country to another, however. Thus families with one or more children account for two-thirds of all households in Italy. The proportion is almost as high in Ireland, but drops to under one-third in Sweden - which also has the highest proportion of childless couples (nearly one-third of households) and the highest proportion of people living alone (nearly one-fourth of households). When it comes to one-parent families, the UK holds the record, with nearly one household in 10.

## EMPLOYMENT - Europeans are joining the workforce later and later

**Part-time work and work at night and on Sundays are on the rise.**

Young Europeans are continuing their studies for ever longer periods and are therefore starting work later than their parents, on the whole. In most European Union (EU) countries the school-leaving age is 15 or 16 years, but most youngsters stay on much longer. This was true of 83% of 16- to 18-year-olds in 1997, according to Eurostat, the European statistical office, in a recent publication entitled "Living conditions in Europe - Statistical Pocketbook."

Logically, Europeans are starting work later than their parents. In 1997, in the EU as a whole, it was only with the 23-year-olds that you reached an age group in which at least one in two young people had a job at which they spent 12 hours or more per week.

Even so, people start work at an earlier age in some countries than others. Thus in Britain, Germany, Denmark and Austria, at least one in two 19-year-olds had a job. In Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Portugal the average age at which young people start work was slightly below 23 years. In Belgium and Sweden it was 23 years. However, in Greece, France and Finland it was 24 years, and in Spain and Italy it was 25 years.

While Europeans are going to work at a later age than before, the hours worked are also different, given that a growing number of jobs are part-time, at night and on Sundays. Part-time jobs accounted for 14% of all jobs in the EU in 1990, a figure which had risen to 17% in 1997. Nearly one in three women in employment has a part-time job. However, in 1997 20% of those with part-time jobs would have preferred a full-time job, as compared to only 10% in 1992.

Some 18 million workers and employees in the EU - 14% of the total - were on night shifts, either regularly or occasionally. In most member states the proportion of such workers was fairly close to the EU average, with the exception of the UK, where a record 22% of the workforce was working at night. Portugal, with just 1%, was at the other end of the scale. On the whole, far more men than women work at night.

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One in four employees in the EU were working on Sundays, either habitually or from time to time, in 1997. Here, too, the UK was in the lead with a record 40% of all workers. Sunday work is also very well developed in Denmark (34%) and Sweden (32%). But it is not particularly prevalent in the southern member states and Luxembourg, where the proportion of workers who work on Sundays is below 20%.

## INFLATION - A moderate price rise in May...

**...of 1.1% in the European Union and of 1% in the euro area.**

Prices rose more slowly in the European Union (EU) in May, according to Eurostat, the EU's statistical office. For the EU as a whole they rose by 1.1% on an annualized basis, as against 1.2% in April. In the 11-nation euro area*, which consists of the EU countries that adopted the single currency on January 1, the rate of inflation was 1%, as compared to 1.1% in April.

Sweden recorded the lowest rate of inflation in the EU in May (0.3%). It was followed by Germany and Austria (0.4%), France (0.5%) and Belgium (0.8%). Countries with rates above the EU average were the UK and Luxembourg (1.3%), Finland (1.4%), Italy (1.5%), Denmark (1.6%), Spain, the Netherlands and Portugal (2.1%), Greece (2.2%) and, finally, Ireland (2.3%). Ireland, consequently, took over from Greece the dubious distinction of having the highest inflation rate in the EU, which the latter has "enjoyed" for years.

* Austria, Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain.

*Please contact us by fax or e-mail if you would like copies of the documents used in the preparation of Eurofocus articles.*

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