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Citizens Information Board
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EU Supplement

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This supplement covers the significant European Union (EU) developments during December 2006 – February 2007 in the broad areas of social policy, consumer policy and citizens' rights. There is further information about almost all the issues mentioned on the Europa website: <http://europa.eu>. In some cases, we give the extended website address. The Official Journal of the EU may be accessed via <http://eur-lex.europa.eu>

Employment and Social Policy

European Globalisation Fund

The European Globalisation adjustment fund (EGF) came into operation in January 2007. The maximum annual amount of the fund is €500 million.

The fund will be used to help workers affected by redundancies resulting from major structural changes in world trade patterns to be reintegrated into the labour market. Financial help may be provided where such changes lead to a serious economic disruption, notably a substantial increase of imports into the EU, or a rapid decline of the EU market share in a given sector or a delocalisation to third countries, which results in:

- At least 1,000 redundancies over a period of 4 months in an enterprise in a member state, including workers made redundant in its suppliers or downstream producers, or
- At least 1,000 redundancies, over a period of 9 months, particularly in small or medium-sized enterprises, in certain sectors and regions.

The fund may also be used in exceptional circumstances even if these particular conditions are not met and redundancies have a serious impact on employment and the local economy.

The sort of help which may be available includes:

- Job-search help, occupational guidance, training and re-training including ICT skills and certification of acquired

experience, outplacement assistance and entrepreneurship promotion or help for self-employment

- Special time-limited measures, such as job-search allowances, mobility allowances or allowances to individuals participating in lifelong learning and training activities, and
- Measures to stimulate in particular disadvantaged or older workers, to remain in or return to the labour market.

The fund may finance up to 50% of the cost of such measures. It will not finance passive social protection measures – it can be used only to promote reintegration into the labour market.

Supplementary pension schemes

The European Court of Justice (ECJ) has ruled (in Case C-278/05) that member states are not themselves required to finance rights to old-age benefits under supplementary pension schemes in the event of the employer's insolvency. However, it also ruled that the level of protection of those rights provided in the UK was inadequate.

The Directive on the protection of workers in the event of the employer's insolvency (Council Directive 80/987/EEC of 20 October 1980) provides that the member states must take certain measures to protect the interests of employees and former employees in the event of the employer's insolvency. These include measures in respect of entitlement to old-age benefits under occupational pension schemes.

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The Court held that the Directive does not oblige the member states themselves to fund the rights to old-age benefits. They are obliged to ensure that the necessary measures are taken. This means that they could, for example, impose an obligation on employers to insure or provide for the setting up of a guarantee institution in respect of which it will lay down the detailed rules for funding, rather than provide for funding by the public authorities. The Directive cannot be interpreted as demanding a full guarantee of the rights in question. In so far as it does no more than prescribe in general terms the adoption of the measures necessary to 'protect the interests' of the persons concerned, the Directive gives the member states, in relation to the level of protection, considerable latitude which excludes an obligation to guarantee in full.

<http://curia.europa.eu>

Services Directive

The proposed Services Directive has been agreed by the Council. It must be implemented by member states within three years – by the end of December 2009.

Directive 2006/123/EC of 12 December 2006 on services in the internal market is published in OJ L 376, 27 December 2006.

Health and safety strategy

The Commission has published the 2007–2012 health and safety at work strategy which aims to cut work-related illness and accidents by a quarter. The strategy sets out a series of actions at EU and national levels in the following main areas:

- Improving and simplifying existing legislation and enhancing its implementation for example, by exchange of good practices, awareness-raising campaigns and better information and training
- Defining and implementing national strategies adjusted to the specific context of each member state. These strategies should target the sectors and companies most affected and fix national targets for reducing occupational accidents and illness.
- Mainstreaming of health and safety at work in other national and EU policy areas (education, public health, research)
- Identifying and assessing potential new risks through more research, exchange of knowledge and practical application of results.

http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/health_safety/index_en.htm

Social protection and inclusion

The Commission has published the 2007 Joint Report on Social Protection and Inclusion. This outlines the progress

made and the challenges remaining in the areas of social inclusion, pensions, healthcare and long-term care. This report examines the first integrated national strategies on these areas. It reviews the main trends across the EU and in the member states. It includes country profiles identifying the key challenges in each member state, and draws conclusions on what needs to be done.

http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/social_inclusion/jrep_en.htm

Justice and Home Affairs

Justice and home affairs funding programmes

New funding programmes in the area of justice and home affairs for the period 2007–2013 have been agreed. Some other proposed funding programmes have not yet been agreed. Some of these programmes are new versions of existing programmes.

There are three framework programmes and each has a number of specific programmes:

Solidarity and management of migration flows

This framework programme has four specific programmes:

- The European Refugee Fund – the current fund runs until the end of 2007 when the new fund will start
- The External Borders Fund (Ireland and the UK do not participate in this)
- The European Fund for the Integration of Third-Country Nationals – this came into operation in January 2007
- The European Return Fund – this will come into effect in 2008.

Fundamental Rights and Justice

This framework programme has five specific programmes:

- Prevent and combat violence against children, young people and women and to protect victims and groups at risk (Daphne III) - this aims to support the work of NGOs, develop and implement awareness-raising actions, disseminate results, contribute to best practice exchanges and research in this field, develop and implement support programmes for victims and people at risk and intervention programmes for perpetrators.
- Drugs prevention and information – this aims to reduce the social harm and health damage caused by the use of, and trade in, illicit drugs (this is not yet finally agreed)
- Fundamental rights and citizenship
- Civil justice
- Criminal justice.

Security and safeguarding liberties

This aims to promote co-operation in the fight against crime and terrorism. There are two specific programmes under this heading:

- Prevention of and fight against crime
- Preparedness and consequence management of terrorism and other security-related risks.

Fundamental Rights Agency

The European Fundamental Rights Agency became operational on 1 March 2007. It was established by Regulation 16241/06. The Agency is based in Vienna and is an extension of the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia.

The aim of the Fundamental Rights Agency is to provide the relevant institutions, bodies, offices and agencies of the EU and its member states implementing Community law with assistance and expertise relating to fundamental rights.

Among its other activities it will:

- Provide opinions to the EU institutions and to the member states when implementing Community law, either on its own initiative or at the request of the European Parliament, the Council or the Commission
- Present an annual report on fundamental rights issues covered by the areas of the Agency's activity, also highlighting examples of good practice
- Produce thematic reports on topics of particular importance to the EU's policies
- Take measures to raise the awareness of the general public about their fundamental rights, and about possibilities and different mechanisms for enforcing them in general but it will not deal with individual complaints.

http://ec.europa.eu/justice_home/fsj/rights/fsj_rights_intro_en.htm

Environment

REACH

The Environment Council has agreed the Regulation on the registration, evaluation, authorisation and restrictions of chemicals (REACH). REACH provides for a single EU regulatory system for chemical substances. It will come into force on 1 June 2007 and will require the registration over a period of 11 years of about 30,000 chemical substances. It is expected that the most dangerous among them will be progressively phased out and replaced by safer substances.

The day-to-day management of the new requirements will be the responsibility of the new European Chemicals Agency (ECHA) to be set up in Helsinki. The Regulation – Regulation (EC) No. 1907/2006 of 18 December 2006 is published in OJ L396, 30 December 2006. http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/reach/index_en.htm

Environmental protection through criminal law

The Commission has published a proposal for a Directive that would require member states to treat serious offences against the environment as criminal acts and to ensure that they are effectively sanctioned. It also proposes minimum sanctions for environmental crimes. Member states would be required to ensure that a range of activities (for example, illegal shipment of waste and unlawful trade in endangered species or in ozone-depleting substances) already prohibited by EU or national legislation are considered criminal offences, when committed intentionally or with serious

negligence. Particularly serious environmental crimes would be punishable by a maximum of at least 5 years imprisonment and fines for companies of at least €750,000. These cases would include crimes that have resulted in death or serious injury of a person or substantial damage to air, soil, water, animals or plants or when the offence has been committed by a criminal organisation. The proposed Directive also provides for supplementary or alternative sanctions, such as the obligation to clean up/reinstate the environment or the possibility of stopping businesses from operating.

Health and Consumer Affairs

Driving licences

The Council has agreed the proposed Directive aimed at ensuring mutual recognition of driving licences by the member states. The directive sets minimum standards for medical checks on professional drivers and for qualifications and continuous training for driving examiners. It also

provides for a plastic card driving licence with optional use of a microchip. This new type of licence will be obligatory from 2012 and by 2032 all driving licences issued or in circulation must fulfil all its requirements. Directive 2006/126/EC of 20 December 2006 on driving licences is published in OJ L403, 30 December 2006.

The Citizens Information Board is the statutory body which supports the provision of information, advice and advocacy on the broad range of social and civil services to the public. It provides the Citizens Information website and supports the voluntary network of Citizens Information Services and the Citizens Information Phone Service.

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Consumer Strategy

The Commission is working on a new Consumer Strategy for 2007–2013 and is reviewing all the EU laws on consumer protection. The review is examining almost all EU consumer contract law, except for specific rules in specific sectors.

http://ec.europa.eu/consumers/index_en.htm

Healthcare abroad

A new website has been established which gives information on meeting the costs of healthcare abroad.

http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/social_security_schemes/healthcare/index_en.htm

General

Irish language in the EU

The EU now has 27 member states and 23 official languages, including Irish. Irish became an official language of the EU on 1 January 2007. Since then, Irish interpretation has been provided at meetings of the European Parliament and the Council.

Certain documents, including the EU treaties, have been available in Irish since we joined in 1973. Regulations decided jointly by the Council and the European Parliament are now being translated into Irish and correspondence from and to the citizens is translated into and from Irish. The Irish government is responsible for translating the rest of the EU laws into Irish.

EU hotline number for missing children

The Commission has decided to reserve the 116000 telephone number in all member states as a hotline for reporting missing children. All other numbers beginning with 116 are also reserved for social services in Europe and this Decision is binding on member states.

http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/policy/ecom/ info_centre/documentation/legislation/

Accession of Bulgaria and Romania:

Bulgaria and Romania joined the EU on 1 January 2007. The EU now has 27 member states and 492.8 million inhabitants. This means that there are new rules for deciding whether or not there is a qualified majority for votes in the Council. The total number of votes in the Council is now 345; a qualified majority means that 255 votes must be cast in favour of the proposal and they

must be cast by at least 14 member states. A member state may also request verification that the qualified majority represents at least 62% of the population of the EU (for 2007 the threshold is established as 305.5 million people out of a total of 492.8 million).

The distribution of votes is the following:

Germany, France, Italy, United Kingdom – 29 votes

Spain, Poland – 27 votes

Romania – 14 votes

Netherlands – 13 votes

Belgium, Czech Republic, Greece, Hungary, Portugal – 12 votes

Austria, Sweden, Bulgaria – 10 votes

Denmark, Ireland, Lithuania, Slovakia, Finland – 7 votes

Cyprus, Estonia, Latvia, Luxembourg, Slovenia – 4 votes

Malta – 3 votes

Slovenia adopts the euro

Slovenia joined the euro area on 1 January 2007.

Citizens Information 

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