

## European Competition Day on 14 February 2003 in Athens

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On 14 February 2003 the Hellenic Competition Commission hosted in Athens the 7<sup>th</sup> European Competition Day. The European Competition Day (ECD) is an event organised by the competition authority of the Member State holding the EU Presidency in collaboration with the Commission. The aim is to enhance public awareness of the positive effects of competition and competition policy for the citizen and notably for the consumer. The issue of 'Promoting competition and consumers' interests: Chances and limits' attracted 500 participants, so far the largest audience at an ECD.

The President of the Hellenic Competition Commission, Dimitris Tsouganatos, and Christos Theodorou, Vice Minister for Development, opened the conference, followed by speeches of Commissioner Mario Monti and of the chairman of the European Parliament's Economic and Monetary Affairs Committee, Christa Randzio-Plath. Commissioner Monti was satisfied that the ECD has become an established EU Presidency event and demonstrated with the help of several examples of current and recent activity of DG Competition how competition policy creates benefits for the citizen. MEP Randzio-Plath focused on the specific aspects of competition in financial services.

The first round table tackled the interrelation of competition policy and consumer protection. The discussion was about the appropriate delimitation between regulation purported to protect the consumer and the necessary room for freedom of

market participants. There was to a certain extent agreement that the need for protective rules would be more limited if consumers would be better informed and aware of their possibilities. Consumer information would therefore be an essential task for government and consumer organisations. A controversial issue was whether rules on allegedly misleading advertising should be strengthened.

The second round table on 'Competition policy in a period of transition' discussed the benefits of regulatory changes in the area of car distribution and maritime cabotage rights; one participant questioned the usefulness of a more prominent involvement of consumer organisations in merger proceedings.

Between the round tables Professor Eleanor Fox of the New York University School of Law examined 'what is harm to competition?'. Her conclusion: Antitrust helps consumers; consumers must help antitrust. The conference was closed by Sven Norberg, Director at DG Competition, who proved on the basis of examples from recent Commission practice that 'Competition is a better deal for consumers'. He notably set out how the consumer interest often has to be defended against the interest of strongly organised industrial lobby groups.

The Athens competition day offered a very interesting and lively conference. It was of a high quality and very well organised, and certainly set a standard against which later such events will have to be measured.