



Commission strengthens its commitment to equality between men and women

Ahead of International Women's Day, the European Commission has signed a political declaration to build a gender perspective into all its policies for the next five years. The Women's Charter sets out key areas for action, including an equal labour market, equal pay and ending gender-based violence. The Commission also commits itself to promoting gender equality in its relations with non-EU countries. 'This Charter represents the commitment of the Commission to making gender equality a reality in the EU,' said Commission President Barroso. An EU-wide survey on gender equality shows that 62% of Europeans believe that gender inequality still exists in many areas of society. The survey also points out that Europeans' top two priorities for action in this field are tackling violence against women and closing the gender pay gap.

The weaknesses of the existing patent system

Currently the patent system in Europe provides two alternative options. Applicants may apply either for national patents granted by Member States' industrial property offices or for a European patent granted by the European Patent Office (EPO) in accordance with the European Patent Convention. When a patent is granted, the European patent splits it into a bundle of national patents, covered by national legislation. This system involves prohibitive cost, in particular for young innovative companies and SMEs and is prone to be subject to very expensive and risky multi-forum litigation. Patents in Europe are currently litigated in national courts. This leads to multiple litigation of the same patent in different Member States, often resulting in contradictory judgments. (See also p. 6)

Insurance: Commission to examine insurance against natural catastrophes

Michel Barnier, European Commissioner for Internal Market and Services, has announced that the Commission will carry out an in-depth examination of insurance schemes covering national catastrophes, in particular flooding. This initiative will involve a broad range of stakeholders. Dialogues will be held with Member States and insurance experts to exchange examples of best practice and to fix priorities at an appropriate level. The results of these dialogues will be the subject of a conference to be organised by the Commission during 2011. This announcement came in response to an oral question by Irish MEP, Seán Kelly, regarding the 'inability of the market to provide adequate cover' against flooding in certain Member States. Mr Kelly's question follows recent cases of very severe flooding in France, Ireland and the United Kingdom.



Commission set to launch debate on improving trade with developing countries

The European Commission has launched a wide consultation with stakeholders on how the EU's trade policy with developing countries can be improved. Focus of the consultation is the General System of Preferences (GSP) Scheme, under which the EU grants preferences to goods from 176 developing countries and territories. The outcome of the consultation will directly feed into a Commission proposal to the Council and European Parliament on updating the GPS regulation. The consultation can be found at: <http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/press/index.cfm?id=531>

Renewable energy: EU on track for 20% target

According to the latest figures of the Commission, the EU is to reach its target of 20% energy consumption coming from renewable energy by 2020 and might even surpass it. Citing national forecasts from the Member States, the EU is set to reach an overall share of 20.3% renewables in ten years. The forecasts show that five countries – Belgium, Denmark, Italy, Luxemburg and Malta – will be likely to have to buy renewable energy abroad in order to meet their national targets, while ten Member States are likely to exceed their national targets. Commissioner for Energy, Günther Oettinger called it an important milestone for the achievement of goals set in the Europe 2020 Strategy. 'Our task will be to help all Member States, not only to reach the 20 percent target but to go beyond,' he added.



Europe still off the mark for Research and Development

According to the European Innovation Scoreboard published on 17 March, most EU Member States were steadily improving their performance in innovation in 2008. However, the financial crisis has severely hampered further progress to meet the overall 3% of GDP target for R&D investment. Although still maintaining a clear lead over Brazil, Russia, India and China, the EU still has difficulty in catching up with the US. Of all Member States, Denmark, Germany, Finland, Sweden and the United Kingdom were the best performers overall.



Justice and Home Affairs: Commission acts to ensure fair trials

The European Commission has put forward legislation that will help people exercise their 'fair trial rights' anywhere in the EU, when they cannot understand the language of the case. EU countries would be obliged to provide full interpretation and translation services to suspects. The proposal marks the first step in a series of measures to set common EU standards in criminal cases. 'Nobody in the EU should ever feel that their rights and their protection are weakened simply because they are not in their home countries,' said Vice-President Reding, responsible for Justice, Fundamental Rights and Citizenship. 'Without clear guarantees that all EU countries respect our citizens' fundamental rights, how can we build trust between the authorities who should be working together to keep us safe? Justice and security go hand in hand,' Reding stated. The proposal is now to be considered for adoption by the Council and the European Parliament.