

Postal services

Green paper on parcel delivery in 2012

By Sophie Mosca | Monday 12 December 2011

The European Commission will publish a green paper in 2012 to review the question of parcel delivery, vital to the development of e-commerce, announced Internal Market Commissioner Michel Barnier at the first forum of postal service users, held on 12 December in Brussels. The event brought together around 100 users to take part in an “open, frank and objective” round table discussion, the aim being to carry out a constructive evaluation of liberalisation of the postal sector in Europe, set to be completed next year. Barnier noted that he wished to determine “where things stand in terms of the economic impact of this sector and the requirement of social and territorial cohesion of the universal service it provides,” without neglecting the social consequences of changes to its traditional economic model with respect to the development of the internet.

This forum gave a say to stakeholders other than those usually heard at this type of conference: consumer associations presenting the views of individuals, representatives of online commercial operators (eBay, Fnac) for parcels, consignors of large volumes of mail like newspaper publishers, health mutual associations, etc. All these customers and users of postal services voiced their expectations and described the problems they encounter.

An initial finding of the debate was that the postal directives (see box) are not correctly transposed in all the member states. Austrian firms, for instance, criticised the de facto monopoly of the incumbent operator, which prevents any reduction of prices. It is also important to make a distinction between mail distribution, which is declining, and parcel delivery, which is increasing. The decline of the former as a result of the increasing use of e-mail is not identical across the EU, however. Although businesses now use e-mail for a large share of their administrative correspondence, some pointed out that three years after the introduction of electronic invoicing, deliveries through the postal service are still the general rule. Others noted that nothing replaces the “strike force” of an advertisement or catalogue sent through the postal service. For certain non-connected users (such as elderly persons), this is the only way to receive or send documents, bills or cheques. Recurring complaints about postal service concern longer delivery times in the wake of liberalisation and higher prices despite the presence of new entrants.

ECONOMIC STAKES

Parcel delivery represents major economic stakes due to the expansion of e-commerce and has permitted the development of competing operators offering excellent and less expensive services, but that do not deliver everywhere. For businesses, hand-to-hand delivery is important and ‘classic’ postmen tend to leave a delivery notification in the addressee’s absence. They regret the differences in rates and standards from one member state to the next, which hampers the development of cross-border e-commerce and consequently called for action by the Commission and postal regulators.

Changing economic models also require new types of training for postal service employees and innovative solutions for making parcels available in places accessible to people who work (train stations, newspaper stands open later than post offices).

Postal legislation

Directive 97/67 establishes common rules for the development of the internal market for postal services and improvement of the quality of service

Directive 2002/39 determines the stages of opening of the market and further limits the services not open to competition (to certain specific items)

Directive 2008/06 set the final stage of liberalisation in 2010 for most member states (16 that account for 95% of the sector) and 2012 for the others.