



**Comité européen de liaison
sur les Services d'intérêt général**

**European Liaison Committee
on Services of General Interest**

**Europäisches Verbindungskomitee
"Dienstleistungen von allgemeinem Interesse"**

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Founding Declaration

The **European Liaison Committee on Services of General Interest** was established at the European Social Forum on Services of General Interest attended by nearly 200 participants in Brussels on 25 and 26 November 1994. Its aims are to **promote a new understanding of services of general economic interest** ⁽¹⁾ within the context of European integration which addresses the **technological, economic, social and cultural changes** in societies throughout Europe. It is open to all who are engaged in **economic and social activity** in the European Union: institutions, operators, regulators, social economy organizations, trade union organizations, consumer organizations, environmental groups, anti-exclusion groups, researchers, academics, and so on.

The **notion of service of general economic interest** stems from the fact that the nature of the ends and interests involved dictates that certain economic and social activities must be placed outside purely market considerations and must be run according to special criteria which ensure to certain goods and services for all and thereby help create an economically, socially, territorially and culturally balanced and cohesive society.

In all European countries, **services of general economic interest have always been and still are central to economic and social cohesion, as well as land use planning and management**, as the bridge between economic, social, political and spatial regulations, time management and now, today, sustainable development.

From the 1950s up to the Treaty on European Union, the rationale of European integration has been an economic logic, geared firstly to a common, then a single, market founded on the pillars of economic liberalism: free trade, free movement (of people, goods, services and capital), and free competition, thereby turning the market into virtually its own sole regulator.

This logic was applied to services of general economic interest from the mid-1980s with a view to the completion of the Single Market, especially in the transport, communication and energy sectors. It led the European institutions to progressively "**deregulate**" the services of general economic interest - i.e. the operators of publicly or privately owned network infrastructure as historically established in each country - one after another. This has inevitably had a knock-on effect in other sectors, such as local services, housing, health, education, etc.

Article 90 of the Treaty of Rome, preserved intact by both the Single Act and the Maastricht Treaty, provides that "*services of general economic interest ... shall be subject to ... the rules on competition, insofar as the application of such rules does not obstruct the performance in law or in fact, of the particular tasks assigned to them*". Only the **recent case law of the Court of Justice of the European Communities** has begun to give this substance. But its provisions continue to be considered as **derogations from or exceptions to** the overriding principle of competition.

The Treaty on European Union includes new provisions which offer opportunities for factoring in the objectives of balanced and sustainable economic and social progress, social cohesion and solidarity. They are as follows:

(1) The expression used in the Treaty of Rome.

1. **Title XI** (article 129 A) "*Consumer protection*" gives a key place to consumer protection. This could become the mainstay for the recognition of services of general economic interest: meeting consumer needs is their justification, their purpose, and the foundation of their legitimacy.
2. **Title XII** (articles 129 B, C and D) on "*Trans-European networks*" provides for their development, interconnection, inter-operability and points to the existence of a collective European interest.
3. **Title XIII** - Industry - aims to ensure the "*conditions necessary for the competitiveness of industry*", the essential basis of which is the existence of efficient infrastructure.
4. **Title XIV** - Economic and social cohesion - sets the aim of "*reducing disparities between the levels of development of the various regions and the backwardness of the less-favoured regions, including rural areas*"; this is directly relevant to services of general economic interest.
5. **Title XVI** extends the environmental protection responsibilities of the European Union and is also relevant to services of general economic interest, one distinguishing feature of which is their external repercussions, both positive and negative.
6. The **Agreement on Social Policy** annexed to the Treaty has as its objective "*the promotion of employment, improved living and working conditions, proper social protection, dialogue between management and labour, the development of human resources with a view to lasting high employment and the combatting of exclusion*". Services of general economic interest contribute to attaining these objectives.
7. More generally, **articles A and B** set the objectives of developing solidarity between the Member States and between their peoples, and balanced and sustainable economic and social progress. They stipulate that the tasks of the European Union shall be "*to organize in a manner demonstrating consistency and solidarity, the relations between the Member States and between their peoples*" and shall set itself the objectives of promoting "*economic and social progress which is balanced and sustainable, in particular through the creation of an area without internal frontiers, through the strengthening of economic and social cohesion*".
8. Likewise, **article 8** establishes "*Citizenship of the Union*", the content of which remains largely to be fleshed out, such as through access to certain goods and services.
9. The "**White Paper on Growth, Competitiveness, Employment**", adopted by the European Council held in Brussels on 10 and 11 December 1993 recommends a wide-ranging plan of investment in infrastructure networks to "*consolidate the basic foundation of the European economy*".

The principles of accessibility, continuity, equality, equity and building the future remain key issues, but must be put into practice if they are to have their full meaning. That means making the **consumer** a full equal partner. Likewise, there must be a shift from product to service, from quantity to quality: equality does not mean uniformity, but a tailored response to different and differentiating needs. Services of general economic interest must also fully integrate environmental, ecological, safety and reliability concerns in everything they do. Finally, **balancing forces** must be developed both within the services of general interest - which must be really decentralized, open to employee participation and democratically run - and in their relations with the outside world, by giving inhabitants, as consumers, and the local and regional authorities their rightful place, and introducing effective **evaluations** in which all of society is involved.

This will mean righting the **balance of European integration between competition rules and tasks of general interest**. Instead of having competition and services of general economic interest as two opposing camps, we must encourage linkages and convergence between them. Neither is an end in itself, but two ways forward towards the objectives of the European Union.

The European Liaison Committee will **network** on the basis of flexible rules; members will intervene as they wish, without committing or binding the organizations or institutions to which they belong.

Its aim is to increase the **exchange of knowledge and experiences** at European level with all the players concerned.

To this end, its **activities** will focus in particular on:

- organizing, alone or in cooperation with other organisations, debates, symposiums, working meetings, European or international meetings,
- publishing articles, reports and other accounts of its work and proceedings,
- making organized representations to all European institutions and bodies,
- participating in initiatives with other European countries.

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