Services of general interest in Europe

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PURPOSE : to present a report from the Commission concerning services of general interest in Europe. CONTENT : services of general interest are a key element in the European model of society. The new Article 16 in the EC Treaty now confirms their place among the shared values of the Union and their role in promoting social and territorial cohesion. These services also contribute to the overall competitiveness of the European economy and are provided in the context of continuously evolving markets and technologies. The globalisation of trade, the completion of the internal market and rapid technological change can bring about increasing pressure to open up new sectors to competition. It is against this background that the European Council of Lisbon requested the Commission to update its Communication of 1996 on services of general interest in Europe. To sum up, the objective of the present proposal is twofold: - to provide further clarification on different levels of public authorities and of the competition and internal market provisions applied to services of general interest in order to respond to the request for greater legal certainty on the part of operators. Of special concern is the field of the rules on State aid; - to further develop the European framework relating to the good functioning of services of general interest, in which local, regional and national authorities as well as the Community have their role to play, in line with Article 16 EC Treaty. Finally, the communication is organised in several sections. In section 2 the Commission sets out its views on the mission fulfilled by services of general interest. Section 3 provides clarification on the application of competition and Single Market rules to services of general interest. Section 4 presents some preliminary results from experience with the application of the universal service principle in sectors liberalised under the Single Market Programme. Section 5 provides orientation for further action to enhance the quality and efficient provision of services of general interest as a key element in the European model of society.