Services of general interest in Europe

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The committee adopted the report by Werner LANGEN (EPP-ED, D) on the Commission communication. It agreed with the Commission that the definition and operation of a service of general interest should be decided locally, and said that the Commission's task was to define the common principles on which such services were based. The committee also announced its intention of using a little-known clause in the Treaty (Article 192) to request the Commission to submit a proposal to create a legal framework guaranteeing the provision of services of general interest to citizens. The report also backed the Commission's view that European citizens should receive high-quality services at affordable prices and, where justified, free of charge. The Commission was urged to make a detailed assessment of the impact of liberalisation of services of general interest before embarking upon further liberalisation. What mattered was not who performed the general interest services (whether public or private undertakings) but that they should ensure equality of access, security of supply and continuity. While acknowledging the importance of EU competition rules, the report nevertheless said that Member States should be allowed to grant financial assistance to companies for the provision of a service obligation without this constituting state aid. It stressed, however, that state enterprises involved in the running of services should not benefit from preferential tax treatment where there was competition from the private sector. The same rules should apply to the applicant countries. The committee agreed with the Commission that EU competition rules should not apply to national security, the administration of justice, the conduct of foreign relations, national education policies and social security schemes. However, there was support for completing the liberalisation of the transport, electricity, gas and postal services sectors. The report also called on the Member States to look at ways of opening up the water industry to private enterprise. Waste management and transport should also be open to competition, albeit under certain conditions. Lastly, the committee recognised that audiovisual services merited a specific approach in order to guarantee various objectives such as the protection of fundamental rights, pluralism, cultural and linguistic diversity and the protection of minors. There was a particular need to clarify the application of competition rules in respect of public service broadcasting.