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EUROPOLITICS

| The European affairs daily |

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Feminising the ECB

The European Central Bank (ECB), criticised for the low percentage of women in its structures, plans to double, by the end of 2019, the number of women in management positions, said a member of its Executive Board, Jörg Asmussen. «We want to have qualified women in 35% of middle management and 28% of upper management positions by the end of 2019,» compared with 17% and 14% currently, Asmussen told the German daily *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, on 29 August.

Asmussen says a «change of mentality» among the institution's current managers will be «decisive» to achieve these rates.

The ECB's 23-seat Governing Council currently has no female members. Since the bank's inception, there have been only two women in its decision-making body. It was to protest against the absence of women in the ECB that the European Parliament opposed the appointment, in late 2012, of Luxembourg's Yves Mersch, the newest member of the Governing Council. The monetary institution's Directorate-General has only two women in its 14 positions, adds *Süddeutsche Zeitung*.

ENERGY/BIO MASS

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«Light» sustainability criteria for wood pellets and biogas

By Marie-Martine Buckens

As the European Parliament nears its 10 September vote on the controversial proposal by French MEP Corinne Lepage (ALDE) to include indirect land use change (ILUC) factors in the climate impact of biofuels, the European Commission is considering not applying these binding arrangements

to other biomass products, namely solid and gaseous biomass used to generate electricity or heating and cooling. An internal Commission document sets out this possibility.

The draft directive - expected to be finalised this autumn - aims to supplement the sustainability criteria set by Directive 2009/28 on renewable energy, which currently cover only biofuels and bioliquids. The NGO BirdLife, the first to react, describes the sustainability criteria proposed in the draft as a «sham». The non-governmental organisation accuses the Commission of not having learned anything from the biofuels fiasco, referring essentially to its delay in taking ILUC factors into account for biofuel production.

EXPANDING SECTOR

Until now, the Commission has not

considered it necessary to set sustainability criteria for solid and gaseous biomass - mainly wood pellets (compressed wood residues) and biogas (produced primarily from agricultural residues or waste). In February 2010, it simply published - in line with Article 17 of the Renewable Energy Directive - a report on sustainability conditions for solid and gaseous biomass in electricity, heat-

This sector, acknowledges the Commission, should account for «nearly half the 20% renewables target by 2020»

ing and cooling. It did not anticipate the boom in biomass in the electricity and heating sector of recent years. This sector, acknowledges the Commission in its draft directive,

should account for «nearly half the 20% renewable energy target by 2020». That means a more than 50% increase in biomass in final energy consumption between 2010 and 2020. Even if the bulk of production is European, the Commission recognises that the contribution of third countries should «rise significantly in the coming years». This will include the United States, but also Asian countries, where pellets are produced under less stringent regulations than in Europe, since these countries are not bound by the Kyoto Protocol climate rules and are thus exempted from counting carbon emissions from land use, land **(continued on page 4)**

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TELEPHONE

Direct lines: +32 2 737 77 (--)
Instead of (--), dial the two digits
after the person's name.

E-MAIL

Editorial staff:
editorial@europolitics.info

Subscriptions:
subscriptions@europolitics.info

Direct:
firstname.surname@europolitics.info

Advertising:
advertising@europolitics.info

EDITORIAL TEAM

Editorial director:
Pierre Lemoine (20)

Production Editor:
Eric Van Puyvelde (22)

Editorial staff:
editorial@europolitics.info

Editorial FAX: +32 2 732 66 51

Editors:

Anne Fekete de vari (18)
Tibor Szendrei (33)

Special Editions Editor:
Rory Watson

Reporters:

Marie-Martine Buckens (29)
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Nathalie Vandystadt (45)
Lénaïc Vaudin d'Imécourt (60)
Tanguy Verhoosel

Correspondents:

USA - Washington: Brian Beary
Asia - Seoul: Sébastien Falletti
Warsaw: Jakub Iwaniuk

Translation:

Aïda Boghossian, Betty Jackson,
Michèle Morsa, Clémence Sebag

Agenda, layout and website:

Geneviève Jourdain (13)
Grégoire Maus (15)
Christine Serville (14)

MARKETING/SUBSCRIPTIONS

Tel Subscriptions: +32 2 737 77 09

FAX Subscriptions: +32 2 732 67 57

E-mail Subscriptions:
subscriptions@europolitics.info

ADVERTISING

advertising@europolitics.info

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PESTICIDES**With Bayer, Syngenta goes to court to defend its reputation**By *Sophie Petitjean*

The chemical groups Bayer and Syngenta are challenging the temporary ban ordered last May by the European Commission on three neonicotinoid insecticides.

The Swiss group Syngenta and Germany's Bayer confirmed, on 27 August, that they had applied to the EU Court of Justice for annulment of Implementing Regulation 485/2013 (Cases T-451/13 and T-429/13).

Syngenta manufactures Cruiser, a pesticide containing thiamethoxam (one of the three prohibited neonicotinoids).

It denounces a decision based on a «flawed process, an inaccurate and incomplete assessment by the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) and without the full support of EU member states».

«We are also trying to defend our reputation, which was significantly

harmful, particularly considering the significant investments we have made over a number of years in bee health and sustainable agriculture in general,» added a company spokesman, defending the use of legal action for a measure presented as temporary.

Based on an assessment by the EFSA, the Commission decided, on 29 April, to temporarily restrict the use of three neonicotinoids (clothianidin, imidacloprid and thiamethoxam) considered harmful to bee health.

Since the member states failed to come to agreement in the Committee on the Food Chain, the executive decided to ban these substances for the treatment of seeds, soil (granules) and foliar applications on plants and cereals attractive to bees for a period of two years. The measures, originally announced for 1 July, were postponed until 1 December 2013 to allow farmers to plant this autumn treated seed they had already bought for this year. At

the time, 15 member states - including France and Germany - voted in favour of the restrictions, eight voted against (including the UK, Italy and Hungary) and four abstained.

REACTIONS

The Commission reacted to this announcement with the following statement: «Our decision was based on scientific information and on the EFSA's conclusions. [...] We have taken note of Syngenta's statement. Apart from their press release, we have no other information for now.

As soon as Syngenta lodges its complaint with the court, we will examine it carefully.» Environmental organisations immediately voiced support for the Commission. «Instead of taking the Commission to co

urt, [Syngenta] should act responsibly and stop marketing its bee-killing pesticides,» said Greenpeace spokesman Mark Breddy. ■

Biomass*(continued from page 1)*

use change and forestry (LULUCF).

These countries are current and potential suppliers of pellets to Europe, however, and many European intermediaries would like to ensure the conformity of these new energy product streams to existing and future EU rules. The European biomass industry, represented by AEBIOM, whose members include the French group Areva, consequently reiterated in June its request to the Commission to publish European sustainability criteria. AEBIOM is concerned that the increasingly frequent use of national criteria may be a source of restrictions on the free movement of energy materials. AEBIOM also argues for flexible criteria to keep from crippling the industry.

PROPOSALS

In its draft directive, the Commission nevertheless proposes - as it did for biofuels - that solid and gaseous biomass should reach a 60% threshold

for greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions savings compared with fossil fuels to be "recognised" as a renewable energy under Directive 2009/28 and therefore subject to being factored in by member states. BirdLife finds this threshold too low and says it should be raised to 70%. The organisation notes that the Com-

A study, published on 21 August by the JRC, questions the capacity of European forests to continue serving as carbon sinks

mission's proposal disregards the question of "carbon debt". It refers to a study by the Commission's Joint Research Centre (JRC) clearly demonstrating that burning roundwood/stemwood can be more polluting than fossil fuels over the short term. BirdLife acknowledges that the Commission proposes, for its sustainability criteria, to avoid "cer-

tain areas with high biodiversity value," but notes that this criterion offers very limited protection to forests outside protected areas. It criticises the Commission's weak language - giving "due consideration" to conservation zones - in the context of agreements between the EU and third countries. The Commission also proposes to apply these criteria to installations of 1 MWe and higher.

FORESTS SATURATED WITH CO₂

Ironically, as initial reactions to the Commission's draft directive are emerging, a study, published on 21 August by the JRC, questions the capacity of European forests to continue serving as carbon sinks.

"The managed forests in Europe are apparently closer to maximum stocking than was previously thought," reads the study. Its authors call on political leaders, in their negotiations on a new EU forest policy, to take account of the "early warning signs that the European forest carbon sink is becoming saturated". ■

RAIL TRANSPORT

Regulation on rail passengers' rights could be revised

By Isabelle Smets

Will Regulation 1371/2007 on rail passengers' rights meet the same fate as the regulation on air passengers' rights - that is, relegation to "re-examination" after several years of making little headway? It is entirely possible. In a report published in mid-August¹, the European Commission says that the application of rules is generally satisfactory, but that currently certain rights only exist on paper. The regulation's many dispensations and exemptions - which most member states have taken advantage of - are to blame for this. This is the case, for example, for one of the main passenger rights: the right to be provided with assistance (meals, refreshments and lodgings if necessary) in case of serious train delays.

Rail companies consider these rights particularly costly. However, the number of member states that use the dispensations (a lack of time limits in the case of urban, suburban and regional services, which could reach 15 years in the case of national services) means to the Commission that these are "a serious obstacle to realising the objectives of the regulation". According to the report, around 61% of national services and 83% of regional and suburban services can use dispensations. Concerning the right to assis-

tance in case of delays, more than 94% of rail transport can take advantage of a dispensation.

This issue, at least for long-distance services, could be put back on the table in the medium term. As in the case of

Rail companies consider these rights particularly costly

air transport, certain concepts remain vague, and the Commission could use a review of the regulation as an opportunity to clarify these. This is particularly the case for the definition of a suburban or regional service, which is surprisingly absent from the regulation although these services can be granted unlimited dispensations. It is also the case for another sensitive point: financial compensation in case of serious delays. The regulation is not exactly clear regarding the possibility for rail companies to be exempted from this obligation in case of 'force majeure' (an unavoidable accident), as is the case for other means of transport. In terms of passenger relations, this creates difficulties, since passengers do not tend to interpret the regulation in the same way as rail companies. Moreover, in a case pending at the EU Court

of Justice (Case C-509/11), the advocate-general has said that passengers have the right to financial compensation even in case of delays due to force majeure (see *Europolitics* 4608). However, the Commission does not share this opinion, and neither do rail companies. If the ECJ's judgement confirms the advocate-general's interpretation, a regulatory amendment could provide an opportunity for the Commission to clearly establish that force majeure exonerates rail companies from compensation obligations. ■



(1) The report is available at www.europolitics.info > Search = 340789

Regulation 1371/2007

Passengers have the right to assistance (meals, refreshments) on board a train, or in a station, in case of delays of more than 60 minutes, as well as lodgings (hotel or other) if a stay of one or more nights becomes necessary.

Without losing the right to transport, the passenger can also claim compensation of a minimum of 25% of the price of the ticket in the case of a delay of between 60 and 119 minutes, and 50% of the price of the ticket in the case of a delay of 120 minutes or more.

RESEARCH

Open access to research publications becoming the norm

By Marie-Martine Buckens

Research Commissioner Máire Geoghegan-Quinn is pleased to note that access to research publications free of charge for readers continues to rise in the European Research Area, after reaching the tipping point of 50% in 2011. This is confirmed in a study carried out by Science-Metrix¹, funded by the European Commission. On the other hand, Science-Metrix shows in a second study that there are far fewer policies in place for open access to scientific data, a much more sensitive issue.

Open access to research findings is one of the priorities of the EU's research commissioner. It will be mandatory for all scholarly publications receiving support from Horizon 2020, the EU's research and innovation programme for 2014-2020. Researchers will have the choice between two options: articles can be made available immediately online by the publisher ("gold" or "hybrid" open access), with publication costs reimbursed by the Commission; or researchers can make articles available through an open access repository ("green" access) at most six months

after publication (12 months for social sciences and humanities).

Researchers participating in Horizon 2020 will not be required to provide open access to their research data. The Commission nevertheless plans to launch a pilot project on open access to data collected during publicly funded research, taking into account concerns related to possible commercial interests. ■



(1) The study is available at http://www.science-metrix.com/pdf/SM_EC_OA_Availability_2004-2011.pdf

MEDICINES**Orphacol market authorisation not a done deal**

By Ophélie Spanneut

After having fought the European Commission all the way to the EU General Court, it seems that the French laboratory CTRS will just have to keep on waiting for a marketing authorisation for the drug Orphacol. Orphacol is an orphan medicinal product designed to treat rare and sometimes fatal liver disorders (an estimated 90 cases in Europe). In order to be able to market it, in October 2009, CTRS applied for a marketing authorisation. The European Medicines Agency (EMA) gave a positive opinion twice. However, the Commission refused to heed this opinion. In a comitology procedure, the member states twice clashed with the Commission (review committee vote, followed by an appeal) over its wish to deny the marketing authorisation. In a third vote, the representatives of the member states did not garner a sufficient majority to oppose the Commission, which made it possible for the EU executive to deny the marketing authorisation. But the EU General Court - which CTRS had turned to - found in favour of the laboratory, rejecting all of the Commission's arguments.

The next part should have been quick and easy: as soon as the 4 July ruling was pronounced, a Commission spokesperson said the Commission would kick-

start the authorisation process for the drug. Health Commissioner Tonio Borg confirmed as much in a 25 July letter addressed directly to the CTRS laboratory. The Commission then adopted a draft regulation to authorise marketing of Orphacol, which it proposed putting to the member states by 3 August in a written procedure - given that the 28 member states had already discussed the issue three times. And yet that was not

The most pessimistic note that more delays could prove very costly for CTRS

the last surprise in store: one member state refused to agree to the written procedure and asked for an actual meeting to be held. Sources concur to say that it was Poland. Which does not seem much of a stretch as, at the EU General Court, Poland had been the only country supporting the Commission rather than the laboratory - itself supported by France, the UK, the Czech Republic, Austria and Denmark.

RACE AGAINST THE CLOCK

The most optimistic observers hope that the member state in question wants a meeting to be held to review

this unheard of situation and draw conclusions from the EU General Court's ruling, or even potentially teach the Commission a lesson for having made the member states vote three times until it was satisfied with the result. The most pessimistic note that more delays could prove very costly for CTRS.

The US competitor lab, Asklepiion, is also looking to obtain a marketing authorisation for its own drug. In 2012, it filed an application with the EMA, which is expected to give its opinion mid-September. But it is definitely a race as the first of the two labs to obtain a marketing authorisation will get ten-year exclusivity on the EU market.

A comitology committee meeting is planned for 11 September. But when it comes to procedural rules on comitology, since 2011 the Commission has a free hand. It can now single-handedly make a decision about whether the quorum of member states has been or has not been reached and can therefore uphold or postpone a vote since objective criteria on the quorum no longer exist. Moreover, where previously it could only postpone a vote for four specific reasons, under the new rules, this power is at its discretion. No reason need be specified, the Commission consults the member states but is not obliged to follow their opinion for the vote - and it decides the date of the vote. ■

FISHERIES**Overfishing punished by deductions from 2013 quotas**

By Anne Eckstein

Oceana, the international ocean conservation and advocacy organisation, said it was satisfied with the sanctions announced by the European Commission, on 8 August, against the 14 member states that exceeded their fishing quotas in 2012. These sanctions will be worked out as deductions from the quotas allocated to these countries for 2013. This yearly deduction exercise allows the Commission to immediately address the damage done to the stocks overfished in the previous year and ensure a sustainable use by member states of common fishery resources.

This annual yearly deduction exercise allows the Commission to immediately remedy the damages caused to the overfished stocks in the following year and thus to guarantee a sustainable use of the fishery resources. In 2012, 14 member states went over the quotas they had been set for 36 different species. The legal basis for deductions is Regulation (EC) 1224/2009. Quota deductions are operated on the same stocks that were overfished in the previous year, with further deductions made for consecutive overfishing, overfishing above 5% or if the stock concerned is subject to a multiannual plan. However, should a member state have no quota available to

pay back its overfishing, the quantities will be deducted from an alternative stock in the same geographical area, taking into account the need to avoid discards in mixed fisheries. In order to guarantee stock sustainability, certain multiplying factors apply, as set out in Articles 105(2) and (3) of the regulation with a view to ensure the sustainability of the stocks. Deductions on alternative stocks are decided in consultation with the member states concerned and will be published in a separate regulation later this year. ■
The list of deductions per species and per area is available at http://ec.europa.eu/fisheries/cfp/fishing_rules/tacs/info/quota-deductions-for-2013.pdf

ENERGY

E.ON: National regulations could decouple Europe's power markets

By Jakob Schlandt in Berlin

Europe's largest privately owned utility company E.ON is concerned that inconsistent regulation of power plants could reverse the integration of energy markets in the EU. Board member Mike Winkel told *Europolitics* that "We see the rising disparities of European power markets as a very worrying development. The EU wants energy markets to be coupled. Yet, in many countries, new regulations are planned or already introduced that will lead to the decoupling of the markets".

Winkel, responsible for power generation and renewables at Düsseldorf-based E.ON, cited the situation in Germany as an example. There, politicians plan to implement a power plant reserve or a capacity market for conventional power to avoid shortages. "The same discussion is taking place in many European countries." In principle, E.ON supports the plan because European utilities need incentives for power stations to function as backup capacity even though subsidised green energy is pushing prices down.

But Winkel stressed that "we need a solution on a European level. If every country implements their own regulation, this is very problematic for the EU energy market, because it will distort prices and will make cross-border

electricity trade more difficult". For example, subsidies for German power plants would push market prices in Germany lower, flooding the neighbouring markets with more cheap electricity, subsidised by consumers.

According to Winkel, this could mean that the development of a single European electricity market "goes into reverse, because countries would try to shield themselves from developments in the markets of their neighbours". He said that this could already be seen in the case of Poland and the Czech Republic, which are planning to insulate their markets from imported surplus electricity from Germany, which causes grid problems.

Winkel warned that this development could shy away investors. "We fear that investments into new, badly needed interconnectors are delayed or cancelled because of these rising regulation risks. This could lead to a standstill in the development of a European market."

E.ON also calls for a more coordinated green energy policy across Europe and a harmonisation of subsidies for renewables. "Renewables are currently supported by isolated national schemes. This further disturbs electricity trade between countries inside the EU." The EU plans to couple European energy markets step by step to reach a coherent

pricing mechanism across borders.

A paper by the think tank Regulatory Assistance Project (RAP) has recently identified the introduction of capacity markets as problematic for market integration. It would be "increasingly difficult to sustain purely national instruments to pay for firm capacity with market coupling," the authors concluded. Member states that opt to unilaterally establish a capacity market would be running the risk of creating considerable windfalls for the generators receiving capacity payments, and higher electricity costs for their consumers and the national economy. Yet, RAP sees remedies. For example, regulators would have to take steps to eliminate potential "double payments".

Winkel reiterated E.ON's call for a reform of the EU's Emissions Trading System (ETS). "We urgently need a functioning ETS in Europe. The ETS and the price crash of the certificates sends no signals to the markets to invest in green energy."

Low prices across Europe have pushed many utilities into the red. E.ON's profits and its share price in particular have decreased over the last years. Winkel said: "In Germany, even our nuclear power plants are barely profitable. We are constantly monitoring every single power station in terms of profitability". ■

ANIMAL HEALTH

Bird flu: Commission steps up surveillance in Italy

By Sophie Petitjean

The European Commission proposes to expand the zones under surveillance in Italy following the detection of three cases of highly pathogenic H7N7 avian influenza in this country. It adopted, on 27 August, an implementing decision lengthening the 19 August list of protection and surveillance zones on Italian territory.

Avian influenza (or bird flu) is a highly contagious viral disease that occurs in poultry and other birds. Low pathogenic strains do not cause serious disease, but highly pathogenic strains have a very high

mortality rate in most species of poultry. In China, 134 people have contracted the H7N9 strain of bird flu, which has been fatal to 45.

In Europe, Italy reported an outbreak of highly pathogenic bird flu in mid-August. On 19 August, the Commission adopted an implementing decision identifying risk areas. Directive 2005/94/EC on the control of avian influenza sets out certain preventive measures based on surveillance and early detection as well as minimum control measures to be applied in the event of an outbreak of the disease in poultry or other captive birds. The direc-

tive requires the establishment of protection and surveillance zones in the event of an outbreak of highly pathogenic bird flu. Following the detection of two new outbreaks, on 21 and 23 August, and a meeting of the Standing Committee on the Food Chain and Animal Health on 26 August, the Commission decided to set new risk areas for controlling the disease. The decision, which replaces the 19 August decision, will be reviewed by the Standing Committee on 10-11 September. ■

*The decision is available at www.europolitics.info.
info > Search = 340753*

DIGITAL AGENDA**13.7 mn euro boost for cross-border digital public services**By *Sophie Mosca*

The European Commission's new e-SENS (Electronic Simple European Networked Services) project, launched on 14 August, aims to boost the development of cross-border digital public services by helping companies to operate across the EU, while cutting costs.

With a budget of €13.7 million under the Digital Agenda strategy, e-SENS should make it easier to set up a company, fulfil legal requirements and take part in public tenders.

The project will also link up national

digital services for citizens who visit a different member state on holiday, or for work or study.

The e-SENS project brings together more than 100 partners from 20 countries - from Portugal to Turkey - who are developing and implementing building blocks based on open standards and specifications in interoperable eIDs, e-signature, e-delivery and e-documents, which innovators from the public and private sector can use to create new digital public services, helping to «build, connect, and grow» Europe.

The initiative has been developed

within the context of a larger movement aiming to provide European public services with more efficient online information services: the STORK 2.0 project, for example, contributes to the creation of a single European electronic identification and authentication area, while e-CODEX improves the cross-border access of citizens and businesses to legal services in Europe. ■

EU/IMO**Ratification of convention on training for fishing vessel personnel**By *Anne Eckstein*

The European Commission has presented a proposal for a decision - COM(2013)595 - authorising member states to ratify the International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Fishing Vessel Personnel (STCW-F) of the International Maritime Organisation (IMO).

Adopted in 1995 by 74 countries, 22 of which are now EU member states, the STCW-F Convention aims to ensure that fishing vessel personnel are qualified and to minimise potential threats to safety of

life and/or property at sea or to the marine environment. It is implemented in EU law through Directive 2008/106/EC.

In the EU, Directive 2005/36/EC lays down clear rules on professional qualifications and mutual recognition between member states and applies to all regulated professions. While activities that fall under the STCW-F Convention are regulated in most member states, the convention does not lay down a system of recognition of professional qualifications similar to the one established by the directive. Member states are also not allowed to ratify the STCW-F Conven-

tion without prior authorisation from the EU because provisions on the recognition of professions exercised by EU nationals on board fishing vessels affect the exercise of the Union's exclusive competence in this area. The Commission's proposal therefore addresses this requirement. The member states that ratified the convention before the entry into force of the proposed decision are required to submit to the IMO, by 31 December 2013, a statement acknowledging that EU law shall prevail in case of conflict in relations between member states. ■

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EU/US

NSA spying scandal puts Washington on defensive

By Brian Beary in Washington

This summer's revelations of mass-scale US government monitoring of e-mails and phone calls of ordinary citizens has put Washington on the defensive in its dispute with the EU over data protection norms. With EU-US talks for a free trade agreement successfully launched in July, this issue is gaining increasing prominence. US President Barack Obama, on 9 August, announced a series of actions aimed at increasing oversight and constraints on the National Security Agency's (NSA) spy programmes, which NSA contractor Edward Snowden exposed in May. The US tech industry, meanwhile, is trying to dispel the notion that US data protection norms are weak, fearful that this perception will encourage companies to move cloud computing operations to Europe.

"The US is not listening to, or reading, everything that is said by citizens of other countries," insisted Cameron Kerry, general counsel at the US Department of Commerce, speaking at the German Marshall Fund, on 28 August. Kerry, the younger brother of Secretary of State John Kerry, said he wanted the EU and US approaches to data privacy to "achieve outcomes that are compatible". He admitted that "bridging the gaps has gotten harder" following the Snowden disclosures. It would be a "sad outcome," he said, if EU countries responded by erecting a "series of walled gardens where governments hold the key to locked gates".

Washington opposes moves by other governments to force companies to host data on their territory, he stressed.

CLOUD COMPUTING MOVING TO EUROPE?

The American IT industry is nervously watching these developments. The Information Technology & Innovation Foundation (ITIF), a Washington-based think tank, recently published a policy paper, which claims that governments like France and Germany are trying to exploit the NSA scandal in order to promote domestic cloud computing industries. ITIF felt that the US cloud computing providers were in danger of ceding market share, with potential losses of between US\$21.5 billion and US\$35 billion by 2016. "Europeans in particular are trying to edge out their American counterparts and they are enlisting their governments to help," it said. The global market of the cloud computing industry will be US\$148.8 billion by 2014, it estimated. Asked by *Europolitics* about this eventuality, Kerry urged EU citizens to examine whether the US surveillance programmes were, in fact, any more intrusive than the spy programmes of their own governments. "In most cases, the answer is no," Kerry claimed.

Meanwhile, Obama, on 27 August, met with the high-level working group he set up earlier in August to review US intelligence and communication technologies. The group's mission is to give advice on

how the US "can employ its technical collections capability in a way that optimally protects our national security and advances our foreign policy while respecting our commitment to privacy and civil liberties," the White House said. The group is due to present its final report by the end of 2013. On 9 August, the White House said that it would "work with Congress" to tighten legislation to impose greater oversight, transparency and constraints on the US administration's spy programmes. For instance, Obama said he was open to changing the procedures of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court - the body that authorises spy programmes - to allow the government's position to be challenged by an adversary.

Unlike the EU, the US lacks a single comprehensive law on data protection. There are tentative moves in Congress to update the 1986 Electronic Communications Privacy Act in light of the NSA revelations but it remains far from certain that legislative action will be taken. Meanwhile, progress has been slow in implementing Obama's February 2012 white paper on consumer data privacy. In July, the first voluntary code of conduct was approved for privacy standards in mobile applications. Transatlantic differences on data privacy norms are casting a shadow over the 2000 Safe Harbour EU-US agreement, which allows for a free flow of commercial data on the basis of US-based companies voluntarily pledging to adhere to EU norms. ■

In brief

Action plan for Morocco

The European Commission published, on 29 August, the first part of its 2013 action plan for Morocco. Totalling €110 million, the programme is intended to support the country's economic and social development.

"Our support for these two major areas of socio-economic reforms allows us to contribute to a more inclusive growth in line with the commitments made

by the EU to its Moroccan partner in line with the new approach of the European Neighbourhood Policy," said Enlargement Commissioner Stefan Füle. The action plan will look at ways to support on the one hand the establishment of a universal medical coverage system, and on the other an agricultural development policy to benefit peasant farming.

EU/SYRIA**EU calls for unity over Syrian crisis, split on measures to adopt**By **Lénaïc Vaudin d'Imécourt**

As is often the case when it comes to adopting a common strategy in the area of foreign affairs, senior EU officials - from the member states, the European Parliament or the External Action Service - all agree unity must be the motto, but then immediately disagree on what measures to take.

In this regard, the Union's approach towards the Syrian crisis - and more recently the chemical attack allegedly perpetrated by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime on 21 August, which killed hundreds of civilians - is no different. A consolidated response is of the utmost importance, according to all those involved. But divisions arise on whether military strikes on certain specific targets are necessary or not.

PROOF

France, the United Kingdom and the United States were very quick to condemn the chemical attack - the authenticity of which is not questioned - and to blame al-Assad's regime for the move, stepping up war rhetoric against the country. Yet, the

United Nations' chemical weapons investigators are still on the ground to gather evidence and have not yet published their final report.

Reports of the poison gas attack "should be immediately and thoroughly investigated by the United Nations expert mission, which arrived recently in Syria," High Representative Catherine Ashton said shortly after the event, on 21 August. "I fully support the UN's call for a thorough, impartial and prompt investigation into these alleged chemical attacks," she reaffirmed in a second statement, on 23 August.

The president of the European Parliament shares the opinion that the international community must base its response on the findings of the UN experts. "No to hasty and unilateral intervention in Syria, the international community has to act together and on the basis of the UN report's results," Martin Schulz tweeted, on 27 August.

Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET), the members of which met on 28 August behind closed doors to discuss the issue, is of the opinion that proof is needed for the accusations that

the Syrian government was behind the chemical attack.

MILITARY RESPONSE

In any case, a military intervention by the US, the UK and France seems imminent, despite delays caused by internal divisions within the British political scene and despite China and Russia blocking the adoption of a UN Security Council resolution tabled by the UK that would authorise the use of military force in Syria.

Such a response is necessary, according to the leader of the Liberals in the European Parliament, Guy Verhofstadt (Belgium). "Europe should show al-Assad that it cannot accept in any way his crimes against humanity. This intervention should not be a loose coalition of the willing but a strong cooperation between the US, the EU, Turkey and the majority of the Arab countries," he said in statement, on 27 August.

But the foreign and defence ministers of the 28 EU member states will not be able to discuss this before they meet on 5-6 September in Vilnius for the informal Defence and Foreign Affairs Councils. ■

In brief**ING sells South Korean subsidiary**

ING has taken a big step in the divestment route imposed by the Commission to compensate for the €10 billion in state aid received during the financial crisis. On 27 August, the Dutch company announced the sale of its South Korean life insurance subsidiary ING Life Korea to the investment fund MBK Partners, for €1.24 billion.

«Together with the scheduled payment of the next tranche to the Dutch state, in November 2013, this will bring us closer to the end phase of the restructuring of our company,» ING Chief Executive Jan Hommen said. ING has to pay back a total of around €13.5 billion to the Dutch state, and was initially set to sell its various insurance subsidiaries by the end of 2013. In November 2012, the EU executive agreed to relax its requirements, setting new deadlines, with some extending until the end of 2018.

Fund management merger authorised

3i Group of the UK obtained clearance from the European Commission, on 29 August, to proceed with its acquisition of Barclays Infrastructure Funds Management (BIFM). Reviewing the proposed transaction under the simplified procedure, the Commission found that it did not create competition concerns because the companies have limited market shares on the markets in question. BIFM, a subsidiary of Barclays banking group, is a fund management business focused on infrastructure investment in the UK, France, Ireland and Italy. 3i Group is an international investor and investment management company focused on mid-market private equity, infrastructure and debt management.

Combating piracy in West Africa

The European Union plans to step up its efforts to combat piracy in the Gulf of Guinea, which now has one of the world's highest number of attacks. «The EU is developing a Gulf of Guinea strategy,» said, on 28 August, Rear Admiral Jurgen Ehle, who heads an EU military mission for West Africa. He added that European leaders would like to finalise their plan by the end of October. The deployment of warships, one of the measures that helped bring down piracy attacks in East African waters, is not part of the plan, however, said Ehle, speaking at a maritime security conference. The EU mission will focus on coordination of regional navies and training.

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