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I. EU Competitiveness

1. EU leaders rule out special aid plan for Eastern Europe

In short:

EU leaders meeting in Brussels on 1 March refused to back the idea of a multi-billion bail-out plan for the bloc's Central and Eastern European member states, instead opting to help the region's troubled economies on a country-by-country basis.

In an attempt to address what top EU officials described as a negative media campaign depicting sinking Central and Eastern European economies, Czech Prime Minister and current EU president Mirek Topolánek noted that the new member states did not want a rescue plan for their region. He said those countries felt the need for solidarity but also shared responsibility. "The EU will not leave anyone in the lurch," he stressed, but would respect the rules of the European single market at the same time.

More on: <http://www.euractiv.com/en/opinion/eu-leaders-rule-special-aid-plan-eastern-europe/article-179855>

2. Commission cuts red tape for micro-enterprises

In short:

The European Commission plans to ditch accounting requirements for the EU's smallest companies in an effort to ease the administrative burden and save each business up to €1,200 per year, or a total of €6.3 billion.

Member states will be allowed to completely abolish financial reporting obligations for micro-enterprises as part of the European Economic Recovery Plan, which was originally unveiled in November 2008. Internal Market and Services Commissioner Charlie McCreevy said the move will ease the burden on small businesses at a time of economic uncertainty, but it will be up to member states to decide whether to implement the proposal.

More on: <http://www.euractiv.com/en/innovation/commission-cuts-red-tape-micro-enterprises/article-179842>

3. Europe facing skills 'mismatch'

In short:

Despite growing unemployment, millions of jobs across the EU cannot be filled, according to Rudi Thomaes, the CEO of the Federation of Enterprises in Belgium. Europe's workers do not have the right skills to meet the needs of modern businesses, he said.

Thomaes said four million vacancies could not be filled last year because the 18 million unemployed Europeans did not have the qualifications required to take up the available positions. "We are facing an unprecedented mismatch of skills and personnel. Unemployment numbers will rise from 18 million to 22 million this year, even though there are four million vacancies that employers cannot fill," he said.

A series of "massive re-skilling programmes" will be required to reorient the workforce to fit employers' requirements, he said.

More on: <http://www.euractiv.com/en/innovation/europe-facing-skills-mismatch/article-179907>

4. Money 'not a problem' for Year of Creativity

In short:

Despite not having a dedicated budget, the European Year of Creativity and Innovation can still have a long-term impact on attitudes to education and entrepreneurship, according to Ján Figel', EU commissioner for education, training, culture and youth.

Commissioner Figel' told EurActiv that a budget for the European Year of Creativity and Innovation (EYCI) was not requested because it would be sufficient to use existing funds. "There is no dedicated budget for EYCI because the year was originally introduced as an inter-institutional declaration, meaning it was a political proposal rather than a legal text."

"Parliament then changed its mind, asking for a legislative proposal aimed towards co-decision. No request for a dedicated budget for the year was made in the legislative proposal," Figel' told EurActiv.

More on: <http://www.euractiv.com/en/innovation/money-problem-year-creativity/article-179920>

5. Clinton sees US and EU leading the world

In short:

There is a leadership crisis in the world and America and the European Union must take the lead in addressing it, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton told an audience of young Europeans in Parliament on 6 March.

In an invitation-only event entitled 'The next generation takes the floor', at which most participants appeared to be young employees or trainees of the EU institutions, Clinton complimented Europe on its integration, calling it an "extraordinary international effort". "Europe today is viewed by many as a miracle," said Clinton, stressing that the EU is experiencing its "longest period of peace since the Roman Empire," while the countries of the Union have never been more prosperous or more secure.

More on: <http://www.euractiv.com/en/opinion/clinton-sees-us-eu-leading-world/article-180031>

6. Ministers call for better communication on economic crisis

In short:

Amid public incomprehension over billions of euro being poured into saving the banking sector instead of EU industry, ministers underlined on 5 March that better communication of basic economics is needed to prevent social and political unrest.

"It will be difficult to make people understand political initiatives and actions if you cannot clearly explain the difference between the system's nature and the importance of the financial sector, in particular institutes there, and the rest of the real economy," Industry Commissioner Günter Verheugen told the press after a meeting of EU competitiveness ministers.

Verheugen said ministers had reached a "clear understanding" that both the EU and national governments need to change their ways of communicating about the crisis, to make people understand why billions were spent on the banking sector and not small companies, for example. "We need to be aware that the problem we have is potentially explosive and there is a lot of political and social dynamite in it," he warned.

More on: <http://www.euractiv.com/en/euro/ministers-call-better-communication-economic-crisis/article-179998>

7. Barroso rejects bold ideas for EU financial reform

In short:

In a single strike, European Commission President José Manuel Barroso put a stop to rampant speculation regarding issuing EU bonds, rebutted suggestions that troubled EU countries would be put on a fast-track to eurozone accession and dismissed calls for a single EU-wide financial supervision watchdog.

Despite positive signals by EU Economic Commissioner Joaquin Almunia, Barroso vigorously dismissed the idea of issuing joint EU bonds, or EU-backed government debt, to raise money for troubled member states.

"I don't think it is useful to make speculations over ideas that have no chance at all of being decided," he told reporters on 4 March as he presented the Commission's proposals for an upcoming EU summit on 19-20 March.

More on: <http://www.euractiv.com/en/financial-services/barroso-rejects-bold-ideas-eu-financial-reform/article-179971>

8. Recession scuppers EU's growth and jobs goals

In short:

Any hope Europe had of becoming the world's most competitive knowledge-based economy by 2010 have been dashed by the global economic downturn, with all of Europe's economies hit hard by recession, according to a report to be published on 12 March.

The Annual European Growth and Jobs Monitor shows that Finland is best placed to withstand the credit crunch, while Ireland has recorded an unprecedented fall of nine places to thirteenth in an Allianz / Lisbon Council study of the fourteen largest economies in Europe. "Given the dramatic decline in performance over the past 12 months, the EU-15 will not be able to reach the Lisbon targets in 2009 nor presumably in 2010, with the current overall score of 0.84 – compared to 1.12 at the end of 2007," according to a statement released ahead of the report's official launch.

More on: <http://www.euractiv.com/en/innovation/recession-scuppers-eu-growth-jobs-goals/article-180038>

9. Competitiveness Council must uphold the Single Market and resist protectionism

In short:

In a letter to Martin Riman, Czech Minister of Industry and Trade, President Seillière asked the Competitiveness Council to take a clear position against protectionism and insisted that the correct implementation and enforcement of Single Market policy and legislation should be one of the key elements of European economic recovery plan.

Moreover, fast-track implementation of better regulation proposals was urgently needed and could significantly alleviate present financing difficulties for companies with cost saving effects of around EUR 30 billion. Full implementation of the broad-based innovation strategy, as well as clear, consistent and competitiveness-minded implementation of climate policies will support the competitiveness of EU companies in the longer run.

More on: <http://www.businesseurope.eu/Content/Default.asp?PageID=524&articleid=626>

10. Crisis in the industrial sector: urgent need for EU initiatives

In short:

On 25 February the Alliance for a Competitive European Industry held a working dinner with President Barroso to discuss what action the EU needs to take to support industry in the context of the financial crisis. BUSINESSEUROPE Director General Philippe de Buck took this opportunity to urge the Commission to go beyond encouraging coordination of national recovery plans and to make its own direct and specific contribution in managing the crisis and the recovery strategy.

In particular, he emphasised the need to revisit the regulatory agenda, since “business as usual” is no longer an option.

More on: <http://www.businessseurope.eu/Content/Default.asp?PageID=524&articleid=629>

11. WEF New Travel & Tourism report focuses on difficulties facing the sector

In short:

Switzerland, Austria and Germany have the most attractive environments for developing the travel and tourism industry, according to the third annual Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Report, released today by the World Economic Forum. France, Canada, Spain, Sweden, the United States, Australia and Singapore complete the top ten.

This year’s report, published under the theme of “Managing in a Time of Turbulence”, reflects the many difficulties the industry currently faces, which must be overcome to ensure strong sectoral growth in the future. This is particularly captured by the topics covered in the analytical chapters, exploring issues such as the impact of oil prices on the tourism industry, the importance of price competitiveness for attracting tourists, and the extent to which the TTCI explains differences in travel intensity between countries.

More on: http://www.weforum.org/en/media/Latest%20Press%20Releases/PR_TTCR09

II. Other

1. Forfás - Business Expenditure on Research and Development 2007/2008

In short:

This report presents preliminary findings from the latest Forfás/Central Statistical Office survey of Research and Development activities performed in the Irish business sector in 2007/2008. Data analysed in this report include spending on R&D, human resources dedicated to R&D, and numbers of performing R&D firms.

More on: <http://www.forfas.ie/publications/2009/title,3516,en.php>

2. Forfás - Annual Employment Survey 2008

In short:

The Annual Employment Survey is an annual census of employment in all manufacturing and internationally-traded services companies supported by the enterprise development agencies (IDA Ireland, Enterprise Ireland, Shannon Development and Údarás na Gaeltachta).

More on: <http://www.forfas.ie/publications/2009/title,3543,en.php>

3. Forfás - World class skills, education and training can underpin Ireland's return to export-led growth

In short:

"The successful export of high value goods and services enabled by the availability of world class skills, education and training is essential to Ireland's economic success" commented Martin Cronin, Chief Executive of Forfás, the national policy advisory body on enterprise and science, delivering the keynote address at the Institute of Guidance Counsellors Annual Conference in Kilkenny today.

Cronin continued "A flexible education and training system that fulfils the potential of the people who live and work in Ireland must be at the heart of our enterprise policy.

"The employment profile of Irish enterprise is changing. As we move towards 2020, there will be increased emphasis on transferable, soft skills including communication, interpersonal, team working and customer service skills. Skills in creativity, design, problem solving and innovation will be essential for high productivity, and a renewed focus on language skills and cultural understanding will be necessary for Irish companies to compete successfully in EU and global markets. Engineering and computer science skills remain in demand and will continue to be very important."

More on: <http://www.forfas.ie/newsevents/news/title,3547,en.php>

4. US Council on Competitiveness President to Senate Energy Committee: "America Leads in Innovation, but is Bleeding Opportunities"

In short:

Deborah Wince-Smith calls for strategy to focus massive energy stimulus funds on programs that will generate economic growth.

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Deborah L. Wince-Smith, president of the Council on Competitiveness, called for “focus” on turning energy research and development into real economic value before the Senate Committee on Energy & Natural Resources.

“America must spur technological innovation and entrepreneurship by ramping up investment in energy R&D and commercialization,” said Wince-Smith. “This means at least tripling the current federal investment in basic and applied energy R&D, enhancing public-private partnerships with baseline federal funding—to be matched by state and private sector investments—and creating regionally-based R&D test-beds and large-scale commercial pilots for new energy technologies.” Wince-Smith also emphasized the critical role manufacturing must play in achieving energy security and bolstering the U.S. economy.

More on: <http://www.compete.org/news/entry/650/council-on-competitiveness-president-to-senate-energy-committee-america-leads-in-innovation-but-is-bleeding-opportunities/>