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35. Welcomes the Commission's action in reducing telecoms roaming charges; notes, however, that prices are remaining just below the regulated price cap; calls for measures supporting pricing competition rather than regulating retail prices;
36. Welcomes the contribution of the Commission's Directorate General for Competition to the White Paper on Sport, which, inter alia, draws attention to the established case law of the Court of Justice of the European Communities, and the decision-making practice of the Commission with respect to the application of Articles 81 and 82 of the EC Treaty to the sports sector;
37. Invites the Commission to take greater account of the international dimension of its policies as regards the European Union's competitiveness on the global level and to demand respect for and the application of the reciprocity principle in trade negotiations;
38. Considers it crucial that competition policy is adequately addressed in the framework of the negotiation of bilateral trade agreements; calls for the Directorate General for Competition to be actively involved in those negotiations in order to secure mutual recognition of competitive practices, particularly in the areas of State aid, public procurement, services, investment and trade facilitation;
39. Urges the Commission to review the structure of its participation in the International Competition Network and at the European Competition Day in order to ensure that the public is more widely and better informed about the key importance of competition policy in underpinning economic growth and employment;
40. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council and the Commission.

Small Business Act

P6_TA(2009)0100

European Parliament resolution of 10 March 2009 on the Small Business Act (2008/2237(INI))

(2010/C 87 E/11)

The European Parliament,

- having regard to the Commission Communication of 25 June 2008 entitled 'Think Small First' - A 'Small Business Act' for Europe (COM(2008)0394) and the accompanying Commission staff working document on impact assessment (SEC(2008)2102),
- having regard to its resolutions of 30 November 2006 on Time to move up a gear - Creating a Europe of entrepreneurship and growth ⁽¹⁾ and of 19 January 2006 on implementing the European Charter for Small Enterprises ⁽²⁾,
- having regard to the 2 715th Competitiveness Council Conclusions of 13 March 2006 on SME policy for growth and employment, and to the 2 891st Competitiveness Council conclusions of 1 and 2 December 2008,
- having regard to the opinion of the Committee of the Regions of 12 February 2009,
- having regard to the opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee of 14 January 2009,

⁽¹⁾ OJ C 316 E, 22.12.2006, p. 378.

⁽²⁾ OJ C 287 E, 24.11.2006, p. 258.

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- having regard to the 2008 good practice selection of the European Charter for Small Enterprises,
 - having regard to the Commission staff working document of 25 June 2008 entitled European code of best practices facilitating access by SMEs to public procurement contracts (SEC(2008)2193),
 - having regard to the Commission Communication of 8 October 2007 entitled Small, clean and competitive - A programme to help small and medium-sized enterprises comply with environmental legislation (COM(2007)0379),
 - having regard to the Commission Communication of 16 July 2008 on the Sustainable Consumption and Production and Sustainable Industrial Policy Action Plan (COM(2008)0397),
 - having regard to the Commission Communication of 16 July 2008 entitled An Industrial Property Rights Strategy for Europe (COM(2008)0465),
 - having regard to the opinions of the High Level Group of Independent Stakeholders on Administrative Burdens of 10 July 2008 on administrative burden reduction in the priority area of company law, and of 22 October 2008 on the reform of the rules on invoicing and electronic invoicing in Directive 2006/112/EC (VAT Directive),
 - having regard to Rule 45 of its Rules of Procedure,
 - having regard to the report of the Committee on Industry, Research and Energy and the opinions of the Committee on Economic and Monetary Affairs, the Committee on the Internal Market and Consumer Protection, the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs, the Committee on Culture and Education, the Committee on Legal Affairs and the Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality (A6-0074/2009),
- A. whereas the 23 million small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the EU, accounting for around 99 % of all enterprises and providing over 100 million jobs, play a fundamental role in contributing to economic growth, social cohesion and job creation, are a major source of innovation and are vital for sustaining and expanding employment,
- B. whereas SMEs have to be placed at the heart of all Community policies to enable them to develop and adapt to the demands of globalisation, to participate in the knowledge triangle and to adapt to environmental and energy challenges,
- C. whereas despite previous European Union initiatives, there has been little or no tangible improvement in the business environment for SMEs since 2000,
- D. whereas the overwhelming majority of SMEs are micro enterprises, craft businesses, family businesses and cooperatives which are the natural incubators of entrepreneurial culture and therefore play an important role in enhancing social inclusion and self-employment,
- E. whereas SMEs are not provided with sufficient support to defend themselves against unfair commercial practices that are conducted cross-border, such as those of misleading business directory companies,
- F. whereas, despite their differences, Europe's SMEs face many of the same challenges in realising their full potential, in areas such as relatively higher administration and compliance costs than larger enterprises, access to finance and markets, innovation and the environment,

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- G. whereas, as a key contribution to achieving an SME-friendly environment, the perception of the role of entrepreneurs and risk-taking has to change: entrepreneurship and the associated willingness to take risk should be applauded by political leaders and the media, and supported by administrations,
- H. whereas SMEs, when initiating their processes of internationalisation, have to deal with specific problems, such as lack of international experience, scarcity of experienced human resources, a highly complex international regulatory framework, and the need to introduce changes in organisation and business culture,
- I. whereas Parliament has frequently noted with regret the lack of binding legal force of the European Charter for Small Enterprises which has undermined its genuine implementation and that of its 10 recommendations which have, for the most part, gone unheeded; whereas it consequently requested the Council to look into that matter, in its above-mentioned resolution of 19 January 2006,

General

1. Supports warmly the above-mentioned Commission Communication of 25 June 2008, which aims to drive an ambitious policy agenda to promote SMEs' growth through the 10 guiding principles and to anchor the 'Think Small First' approach in policy-making at all levels;
2. Regrets, however, that the Small Business Act (SBA) is not a legally binding instrument; considers that its truly innovative aspect is its intention to place the 'Think Small First' principle at the heart of Community policies; calls on the Council and the Commission to join Parliament in the effort to establish this principle as a binding rule, in a form to be determined, in order to ensure that it is properly applied in all future Community legislation;
3. Emphasises the absolute necessity of implementing the 10 guiding principles at European, national and regional level; calls therefore on the Council and the Commission to make a strong political commitment to ensure proper implementation; urges the Commission and the Member States and to work in close cooperation with all relevant stakeholders to define the priorities and urgently implement, in particular at national level, the SBA Action Plan adopted by the Competitiveness Council on 1 December 2008, ensuring that all parties involved gain effective ownership of the guiding principles;
4. Calls on the Commission to further enhance the visibility and awareness of SME-related policy actions through the bundling of existing Community instruments and funds for SMEs under a separate heading in the EU budget;
5. Is strongly convinced that it is vital to introduce a follow-up mechanism to monitor the proper and speedy implementation of those policy initiatives which have already been launched; therefore calls on the Council to embed the actions to be taken at the level of Member States in the Lisbon process and to inform Parliament annually on the progress made;
6. Calls on the Commission to set up a screening system for the monitoring of the progress achieved following implementation of the 10 guiding principles by the Commission and Member States; calls on the Commission to establish standard evaluation criteria for assessing the progress made; calls on the Member States to incorporate their first progress reports in their upcoming annual reports on the national reform programmes;
7. Stresses the need to place particular emphasis on craft, family, micro- and individual enterprises at EU, national and regional level and urges the Commission and the Member States to take regulatory, administrative, fiscal and life-long learning measures specifically targeted at these enterprises; also calls for the acknowledgement of the specific characteristics of the liberal professions and the need to treat them in the same way as other SMEs except where this contradicts the existing law governing these professions; highlights the important role of SME associations for traders, craft businesses and other professions; calls on the Commission and the Member States to work together to improve the business environment for these industries and the legal framework for their professional and industry associations;

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8. Considers that the Commission's proposals lack a clear strategy for self-employed persons to improve their legal status and rights, particularly if their position is comparable with salaried employees; calls on the Commission to guarantee self-employed persons the right to agree standard tariffs, to organise themselves, and to conclude collective agreements, if their counterpart is a large principal with a dominant position, provided that this does not harm less powerful potential clients and does not cause market distortions;
9. Urges the Commission and the Member States to provide targeted promotion measures and individual support such as information, advice and opportunities to access venture capital for business start-ups in the SME sector;
10. Emphasises the need to develop a social and economic model that creates an appropriate security network for small and medium-sized entrepreneurs in the creative sector, where unstable working conditions are often encountered.
11. Notes with regret that women face difficulties in establishing and maintaining businesses owing to factors such as information gaps, lack of contacts and access to networking, gender discrimination and stereotyping, weak and inflexible supply of childcare facilities, difficulties in reconciling business and family obligations, as well as differences in the way women and men approach entrepreneurship;
12. Applauds the proposed introduction of a network of female entrepreneur ambassadors, mentoring schemes for women to set up their own businesses, and the promotion of entrepreneurship among female graduates; draws, however, attention to the fact that many enterprises are still gender-segregated, which is, and will for a long time be, a very serious problem, since as long as women are discriminated against in the labour market, the European Union loses able workers and entrepreneurs and as a consequence loses money; therefore believes that even more money should be invested in projects to endorse female entrepreneurs;
13. Stresses that female entrepreneurship helps to attract women into the labour market and to improve their economic and social status; regrets, nonetheless, that there is a continuing gender gap in this area, in particular as regards pay, despite the strong interest shown for women, and that the percentage of female entrepreneurs in the European Union still remains low, partly as a result of the unacknowledged (for example, unpaid) and yet important contribution made by women in the day-to-day running of family SMEs;
14. Urges the Commission and Member States to take into account the creative and cultural sector as a driver of economic and social development in the European Union – with a share of 2.6 % of the GDP and 2.5 % of the EU workforce; emphasises the importance of SMEs in stimulating the ICT sector and the creative industry;
15. Emphasises that the creative sector is dominated by SMEs and is especially important in terms of safeguarding sustainable regional employment;
16. Welcomes the Commission's planned introduction of a directive on reduced VAT rates for labour-intensive and locally supplied services, which are primarily provided by SMEs; stresses however that it must not lead to a distortion of competition and must not be ambiguous as to the services which are covered;
17. Notes the need to ensure that SMEs have the ability to buy small, buy green and buy local, thus becoming more climate friendly and efficient;
18. Welcomes the swift adoption of the general block exemption in respect of state aids, and of measures on the statute for a European private company and on reduced VAT rates;

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19. Welcomes the Commission proposal to reduce VAT rates for locally supplied services; calls on the Commission to take further action to relax state aid rules to encourage the provision of public procurement opportunities to local companies, in particular to local SMEs;
20. Supports the idea to extend until 2012 the current exemption from the EC competition rules on state aid of film production and considers this as a great support to creative SMEs;
21. Supports the new state aid rules laid down in Commission Regulation (EC) No 800/2008 of 6 August 2008 declaring certain categories of aid compatible with the common market in application of Articles 87 and 88 of the Treaty (General block exemption Regulation) ⁽¹⁾ for exempting, under certain conditions, SMEs from notification rules;
22. Notes that, despite the clear commitment made in the European Charter for Small Enterprises, the voice of SMEs remain muted within the context of the social dialogue; urges that this deficit is formally corrected by appropriate proposals within the context of the SBA;
23. Sees a need, in the framework of the SBA, for greater emphasis to be given to the area of labour law, especially in view of the concept of flexicurity, which enables SMEs in particular to respond more quickly to changes in the market and therefore to guarantee a higher level of employment and the competitiveness of the company, including its international competitiveness, while taking into account the necessary social protection; in this connection refers to its resolution of 29 November 2007 on common principles of flexicurity ⁽²⁾;
24. Furthermore, stresses the importance of labour law, and especially how its application to SMEs can be optimised, for example through better advice or the simplification of administrative procedures, and calls on the Member States to devote special attention to SMEs in connection with the specific approaches they adopt to flexicurity, including through active labour market policies, since SMEs have scope for greater internal and external flexibility owing to their low staffing levels but also need greater security for themselves and their workers; considers it essential that labour law, as one of the main pillars of flexicurity, provides a reliable legal basis for SMEs given the fact that these businesses often cannot afford a legal or human resources management department; points out that, according to Eurostat, 91.5 % of European companies employed fewer than 10 people in 2003;
25. Considers it necessary to introduce measures to combat undeclared work, which is indisputably a source of unfair competition for highly labour-intensive SMEs;
26. Invites Member States to increase in the mainstream economy the inclusion of SMEs owned by underrepresented ethnic minorities, by developing supplier diversity programmes which aim to provide equal opportunities to underrepresented businesses competing with larger undertakings for contracts;
27. Underlines the importance of a statute for a European Private Company as a new, additional legal form, provided that it is focused on SMEs that intend to engage in cross-border activities and cannot be abused by larger companies, to undermine and circumvent legal provisions in the Member States that foster a system of corporate governance that takes into account the interests of all stakeholders;
28. Calls on public authorities, on the basis of the principle that access to information is a precondition for obtaining information itself, and considering the importance of the Internet as a vehicle in this regard, to simplify institutional websites as far as possible to enable users to pinpoint and better understand the support mechanisms being offered;

⁽¹⁾ OJ L 214, 9.8.2008, p. 3.

⁽²⁾ OJ C 297 E, 20.11.2008, p. 174.

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Boosting R&D and innovation

29. Stresses the importance of innovation for SMEs and the difficulties in taking advantage of research opportunities; considers that national academies of science and research institutes could play a role in driving innovation and reducing barriers to research for SMEs; believes that the focus should not only be on high-tech innovation, but that low and middle level of technology and informal innovation should also be considered; considers that the European Institute for Innovation and Technology could have an important role in boosting R&D and innovation for SMEs; calls upon Member States to multiply initiatives that lower the threshold for SMEs to have access to research; is convinced that all Community research and technological programmes should be designed in a way that facilitates the cross-border participation of SMEs;

30. Supports the Commission's initiative to improve access to the Seventh Framework Programme for research, technological development and demonstration activities (2007-2013) ⁽¹⁾;

31. Calls on the Commission and the Member States to put in place better framework conditions aimed at creating an environment favourable to innovation by SMEs, in particular by introducing ways to improve the protection of intellectual property rights (IPR) and to fight against counterfeiting more effectively throughout the European Union; believes that well-balanced rules on IPR can offer protection whilst ensuring the flow and exchange of information and ideas; emphasises that SMEs need support to access IPR protection, to uphold these rights with the assistance of the relevant IPR authorities and also to use their IPR to attract finance;

32. Calls on the Commission and the Member States to demand that their commercial partners apply the WTO Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) more strictly and to make whatever efforts may be necessary for the adoption of bilateral, regional or multilateral agreements to combat counterfeiting and piracy, such as the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement (ACTA);

33. Takes the view that the full potential of e-commerce for SMEs is not yet fully exploited and that there is still much to be done to achieve a Single European Electronic Market for products and services where SMEs could play a leading role in the further integration of the EU markets;

34. Considers that the participation of SMEs in clusters must be promoted in order to boost innovation and increase the competitiveness of the EU economy; calls therefore on the Commission to support the improvement of cluster management, notably through the exchange of best practices and training programmes, to design and disseminate tools to assess the performance of clusters, to promote inter-cluster cooperation, and to further simplify administrative procedures for the participation of clusters in EU programmes;

35. Calls for the SBA to take account of cooperative arrangements among SMEs (buying and marketing groups), since such groups have been shown to be less at risk of insolvency than individual enterprises;

36. Is strongly convinced that patents play an important role in innovation and economic performance, since they enable innovators to capture the returns from innovative investments and provide the necessary security for investment, equity and loans; is therefore of the opinion that a swift agreement should be reached on a Community Patent ensuring low-cost, efficient, flexible and high-quality legal protection, adapted to the needs of SMEs, as well as on a harmonised European patent litigation system;

37. Stresses the need to promote innovative and pre-commercial public procurement, since it leads to added value for contracting authorities, citizens, and participating undertakings; calls on Member States to increase the share of innovative public procurement and the participation of innovative SMEs in public procurement procedures; calls on the Commission to facilitate the dissemination of best practices in this field, for example regarding tender criteria and procedure and arrangements for risk and knowledge sharing;

⁽¹⁾ OJ L 412, 30.12.2006, p. 1.

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38. Takes the view that for international public procurement, where new technologies allow for cross-border e-commerce, new forms of, for example, combinatorial auctions for SME-consortia and online publication and advertising tenders allow for significant increases of procurement trade not only within the European Union but globally to encourage cross-border e-commerce;

39. Draws attention to the need for sufficient technical and skilled personnel; therefore, believes that more investment is needed in education and that the links between educational institutions and SMEs should be strengthened, so that the promotion of self-employment, entrepreneurship culture and business awareness is included in the national education curricula; encourages the further extension of individual mobility schemes such as 'Erasmus for young entrepreneurs' and 'Erasmus for apprentices', in particular in relation to female participation; supports the envisaged extension of the scope of the Leonardo da Vinci programme and the creation of a European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training; urges the Member States, in collaboration with social partners and training providers, to set up work-based vocational and occupational (re)training and lifelong learning programmes specifically tailored to SMEs' needs that will be co-financed by the European Social Fund; calls on the Commission to facilitate exchange of best practices in innovative training and measures to reconcile work and family life and to promote gender equality;

40. Stresses the importance of encouraging young entrepreneurs and female entrepreneurs through, amongst other things, the introduction of tutoring and mentoring programmes; points out that an increasing number of women and young entrepreneurs work in SMEs, albeit primarily still in the smallest businesses (micro-businesses), and remain vulnerable to the adverse effects of stereotyping and prejudice in connection with business transfers and successions, especially in the case of family businesses; calls therefore on Member States, taking account of the impact of the ageing population, to implement suitable policies and mechanisms, in particular by introducing diagnostic, information, advisory and support tools for business transfers;

41. Points out that the Seventh Framework Programme contains a financial risk sharing mechanism which should enable access to be facilitated to loans from the European Investment Bank (EIB) for large-scale projects; calls on the Commission to assess SME recourse to that mechanism, and consequently to introduce any necessary proposals;

42. Welcomes the launching of a single European network integrating the services currently provided by Euro Info Centres and Innovation Relay Centres in order to support SMEs in all their innovation and competitiveness efforts through a wide range of services;

43. Calls on the Commission to assess SME participation in the Competitiveness and Innovation Framework Programme ⁽¹⁾ and to bring forward any necessary proposals;

Ensure funding and access to finance

44. Points out that the main source of funding for SMEs in Europe comes from their own activity and from credits and loans from financial institutions; notes that SMEs are perceived as higher-risk which hampers their access to finance; calls for a combined effort on the part of financial institutions, the Commission and the Member States to ensure SMEs' access to finance and to offer them the possibility of consolidating their capital by reinvesting their profit in the company; believes that payment of charges prior to SMEs commencing activities should not be required in order to ensure that they are able to build up their own funds and resources; in this respect, points to the urgency of the current financial situation and the need for immediate action;

45. Calls on the Commission and Member States to step up their efforts to promote and provide information on the existence of European funds and state aids intended for SMEs, and to make these two instruments both more accessible and more easily understandable;

⁽¹⁾ Decision No 1639/2006/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 October 2006 establishing a Competitiveness and Innovation Framework Programme (2007 to 2013) (OJ L 310, 9.11.2006, p. 15).

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46. Calls on the Member States to create better conditions allowing SMEs to invest in skills training, not least through direct tax cuts and compensation arrangements between tax authorities and the European Union;
47. Recognises that the Member States' taxation system can be a deterrent to the transfer of businesses, in particular family businesses, increasing the risk of liquidation or closure of the company; calls, therefore, on Member States to review carefully their legal and fiscal framework to improve the conditions for transfer of businesses, especially in cases of owner retirement or illness; is convinced that such improvement will facilitate the continuation of the activities of businesses, in particular family businesses, preservation of jobs and reinvestment of profit;
48. Is very satisfied with the recent alignment between the cohesion policy and the Lisbon Strategy; believes that by directing regional funds more towards entrepreneurship, research and innovation, considerable funds could become available at local level to enhance business potential;
49. Stresses that dynamic financial markets are essential for the financing of SMEs and underlines the need to open up European risk capital markets by improving the availability of and access to venture capital, mezzanine finance and micro-credit; for this reason considers that, in normal circumstances, SMEs should have access to credit provided by actors on the capital markets that can assess their prospects and cover their needs more effectively;
50. Supports the decision taken by the Council and the EIB to adopt a series of reforms to broaden SME finance products by the EIB group as well as offer a substantial development of its global loans to its banking partners, both in quantitative and qualitative terms;
51. Stresses that SMEs' limited ability to access finance is a major impediment to their creation and growth; welcomes, in this respect, the EIB's decision to boost by an additional EUR 30 000 million the funding available for guarantees and other financial instruments for SMEs; calls on the EIB to devise new forms of financial instruments and tangible new solutions to tackle the obstacles that collateral presents to accessing credit; also calls on the Member States, in the light of the current economic crisis, to encourage banks to guarantee SMEs access to credit on reasonable terms;
52. Applauds the recent initiative for a Joint Action to Support Micro-finance Institutions in Europe (JASMINE), which will be beneficial for business start-ups, and in particular will promote youth and female entrepreneurship; calls on Member States, in cooperation with SME organisations and lending institutions to take a proactive role in providing information on access to and application for microcredits and alternative forms of finance;
53. Emphasises the important role of the EIB and the European Investment Fund (EIF) in improving financing available to SMEs, particularly given the current financial turmoil and its repercussions on the credit market; invites the Commission and Member States to investigate further how current banking rules and other financial regulations, including the transparency of credit ratings, could be improved to ease access to finance for SMEs; calls on the Commission in cooperation with Member States and the EIB to establish the right framework conditions for the development of a pan-European venture capital market;
54. Points out that one in four cases of failure of SMEs is due to late payments, in most cases on the part of public administrations; emphasises that the present 'credit crunch' may disproportionately affect SMEs as larger customers put pressure on smaller suppliers to grant extended payment terms; in this respect, welcomes the Commission's proposal to review Directive 2000/35/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 29 June 2000 on combating late payment in commercial transactions ⁽¹⁾ and calls on the Member States to improve the payment culture in their public administrations; urges the creation at Community level of a harmonised time limit for payments, possibly shortened for payments to SMEs, and penalties for exceeding this limit;

⁽¹⁾ OJ L 200, 8.8.2000, p. 35.

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55. Welcomes the measures proposed in the SBA seeking to improve the supply of capital to SMEs; calls in particular, in the light of the financial crisis, for tried and tested state SME support programmes to be expanded and/or continued and for their support to be extended to financial intermediaries;

56. Notes the enormous potential of the EU Competitiveness and Innovation Framework Programme in correcting market failures in SME financing, in promoting eco-innovation and in supporting entrepreneurial culture;

Improving market access

57. Points out that standardisation can lead to innovation and competitiveness by facilitating access to markets and by enabling interoperability; calls on the Commission to improve access to standards for SMEs and their participation in the standardisation process; encourages the Commission to further promote Community standards internationally;

58. Stresses the importance of involving, as fully as possible, the Enterprise Europe Network, the national project management authorities, the chambers of commerce and industry and the public authorities in the promotion at local level of the opportunities offered by the EU programmes for research, development and innovation and by the EU Structural Funds, including the Community initiative on Joint European Resources for Micro to Medium Enterprises (JEREMIE);

59. Notes that public procurement covers around 17 % of EU GDP; calls on the Commission and Member States to strengthen SME access to and participation in public procurement by using the opportunities presented in the above-mentioned European code of best practices facilitating access by SMEs to public procurement contracts through inter alia:

- making more use of e-procurement,
- adapting the size of contracts,
- alleviating the administrative and financial burden in tendering,
- providing relevant and proportionate qualification criteria in specific tenders,
- enhancing access to information on public tenders for SMEs,
- harmonising required documents;

60. Encourages, furthermore, Member States to take the following steps:

- to require contracting authorities to justify the non-splitting of contracts,
- to extend the possibility of responding as a consortium to public calls for tender,
- to make the requirement to pay advances general practice for all public procurement contracts;

61. Notes that there is a need for a system consultancy service that would assist the everyday operation of SMEs during their whole lifecycle with the aim of optimising their investments;

62. Considers that advanced e-business applications, based on the implementation of interoperable electronic signatures and authentication certificates, is a crucial driver of SME competitiveness and should be encouraged by the Commission and the Member States;

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63. Underlines the importance of the internal market for SMEs, and notes that promoting SME access to the internal market should be a priority;
64. Recognises that there are still certain restrictions on the ability of SMEs to fully exploit advantages offered by the internal market; therefore notes that both the legal and political framework of the internal market should be improved to facilitate cross-border operation by SMEs; also notes that a clear regulatory environment would offer SMEs increased incentives to trade in the internal market; considers that Member States should set up single points of contact and web portals;
65. Underlines that improved information on market access and export opportunities within the Single Market is essential at both national and EU levels; calls therefore on the Commission and the Member States and to strengthen information and advisory services, in particular the SOLVIT problem-solving network;
66. Supports calls for the provision of advisory services by Member States to help SMEs defend themselves against unfair commercial practices, such as those of misleading business directory companies, which should strengthen SMEs' confidence to operate cross-border; emphasises the importance of the Commission's role both in facilitating the coordination of, and in cooperating with, such advisory services to ensure the appropriate and efficient handling of cross-border complaints; insists, however, that in the event that such soft measures do not produce results, the Commission should be ready to initiate the appropriate legislative changes which would provide SMEs with similar protection to consumers where they are the weaker party in such transactions;
67. Points out that only 8 % of all SMEs are involved in cross-border activities, which curtails possibilities for growth; considers that it is essential to boost the internal market; believes that Member States should cooperate in harmonising administrative requirements that affect intra-Community activities; calls on the Member States swiftly to transpose and implement the Services Directive ⁽¹⁾ paying special attention to the interests of SMEs and also encourages the swift adoption of the statute for a European Private Company;
68. Believes that there should be a common consolidated basis for company taxation; calls for the establishment of a 'one-stop-shop' for VAT in order to make it possible for entrepreneurs to fulfil their responsibilities in the business country of origin;
69. Calls on the Commission to continuously enhance the framework requirements for the access of SMEs to foreign markets and to support the provision of information; encourages the setting up of European business support centres in China and India, and in all emerging markets, in close cooperation with national business support centres already operating there; because poor SME participation in cross border activities can also be explained by the lack of language skills and multicultural competences, greater means of action are needed in order to achieve this challenge; recalls nevertheless that SMEs need better access to information and qualified advice in their home country;
70. Stresses the importance of progress in trade negotiations which would further reduce regulatory barriers to trade, which affect SMEs disproportionately;
71. Calls on the Commission to include in its work programme the incorporation of equal treatment for SMEs in the rules of the WTO on access to public procurement contracts; calls on the Commission to pay particular attention to the problems encountered by SMEs with customs formalities, in particular by facilitating the adaptation of their computer systems as cheaply as possible to those used by national customs authorities, and by simplifying the arrangements for access to the status of economic operator;

⁽¹⁾ Directive 2006/123/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 12 December 2006 on services in the internal market (OJ L 376, 27.12.2006, p. 36).

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Fighting bureaucracy and red-tape

72. Believes that there is an imperative need to cut red tape by at least 25 % where possible and to put in place a modern administration adapted to the needs of SMEs; therefore, encourages the promotion of ICT knowledge among SMEs, in particular among young and female entrepreneurs, and the better use of digital technology to enable them to save time and money and to devote the resulting resources to their development; calls on the Commission and the Member States to take initiatives in order to exchange and promote best practices, set benchmarks, and elaborate and promote guidelines and standards for SME-friendly administrative practices; is convinced that it is also imperative in the near future to implement the proposals of the High Level Group of Independent Stakeholders on Administrative Burdens with a view to achieving the reduction target without risking access to finance for SMEs;

73. Believes that SMEs, and in particular micro-enterprises, should be taxed in a way that reduces administrative efforts as far as possible, in such a way as to facilitate the start-up phase and encourage innovation and investment throughout their lives;

74. Emphasises the fundamental importance of evaluating the impact of future legislative initiatives on SMEs; therefore calls for mandatory, systematic and targeted impact assessments for SMEs, a so called 'SME test', the results of which should be subject to an independent evaluation that should be made available to the EU legislative bodies; believes that specific attention should be paid to the impact, including the administrative burden, on small and micro enterprises; urges the Commission to apply the SME test to all new proposals for EU legislation affecting business including simplification of existing legislation and withdrawals of pending proposals; encourages Member States to introduce similar SME tests at national level;

75. Is of the opinion that any new legislation, for example to avoid delays in the field of payments, copyright, company law or competition law (such as the rules adopted to facilitate obtaining data litigation concerning anti-competitive behaviour or that arising from the State aid General block exemption Regulation), should be formulated in such a way so as not to discriminate against SMEs but, rather, to support them and the provision of their services across the internal market;

76. Stresses the need for proper and timely involvement of SMEs in policy making; therefore, believes that the Commission's consultation period should be extended to at least 12 weeks from the date on which the consultation is available in all Community languages; recognises the essential and valuable role of representative business organisations, therefore, calls on the Commission wherever relevant, to integrate SMEs and their representative organisations directly into advisory expert committees and high level groups;

77. Calls on the Commission to stimulate simplification and harmonisation of company law and, in particular, accounting rules within the internal market in order to reduce the administrative burden for SMEs and increase the transparency for all relevant stakeholders; urges the Commission to promote strongly the use of new technology such as eXtensible Business Reporting Language (XBRL) by presenting a roadmap for introducing XBRL reporting in the European Union with a view to making it mandatory within a reasonable time frame and to promote and support wide use of this open standard;

78. Encourages the setting up of a 'statistics holiday' for micro enterprises, granting them temporary exemptions from mandatory statistical surveys, the broad application of the 'only once' principle with regard to information provided by undertakings to public authorities, and the further development of e-government;

79. Stresses the need for the introduction of common commencement dates for new Community legislation affecting SMEs; calls on the Member States and SME associations to inform SMEs concisely and comprehensibly of changes to legislation affecting them;

80. Encourages Member States in co-operation with SME organisations to set up, building on existing structures such as the Enterprise Europe Network and Europe Direct offices, national dedicated physical or electronic information contact points and support agencies for SMEs in line with the 'one-stop shop' principle, offering access to various sources of information and support services, structured according to the life cycle of a business;

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81. Recognises the difficulty of setting up a new business as a result of the diversity of systems established in the various Member States; therefore considers it necessary to establish a unified system for setting up businesses in which the process is carried out step-by-step and it is possible for a business to be created in 48 hours;

82. Reiterates that the financial rules governing Community programmes often still lead to unnecessarily bureaucratic, long and costly procedures particularly for SMEs; calls on the Commission to revitalise the Observatory of European SMEs, to publish data on their participation in each Community programme, accompanied by a benefit analysis, and consequently submit proposals on increasing their participation; calls on the Commission to enhance the role and visibility of the respective SME designates in the different policy areas; furthermore, encourages all initiatives allowing the development of an 'SME spirit' in policy making within public authorities, such as the Commission's 'Enterprise Experience Programme' which allows European civil servants to familiarise themselves with SMEs;

83. Deplores Member States' practice of 'gold plating', which is particularly harmful for SMEs, and calls upon the Commission to investigate what further measures might be taken to prevent it; calls for follow-up impact assessments, analysing how decisions are in fact implemented in Member States and at local level;

84. Calls for a special EU website for SMEs which shall contain information and application forms for EU projects, national telephone numbers, links to partners, trade information, information on research projects as well as internet consultation, briefings and information about new regulation;

85. Calls on the Commission to undertake, with Member States, work on the harmonisation of the application forms which must be completed by enterprises in application and tendering processes;

86. Welcomes the Best Idea for Red Tape Reduction Award for the public authorities that have delivered innovative red tape reduction measures at a local, regional or national level;

87. Calls for 30 days payment from EU cohesion funds to those projects which have already been approved, so as to ensure the continued progress, survival and effect of those projects;

Turning sustainability into business

88. Recognises that efforts to improve sustainability could become an important source of (eco-) innovation and a key asset for industry's competitiveness; draws attention to the fact that SMEs are often not sufficiently aware of new energy efficient and environmentally friendly solutions or do not have the necessary financial resources to acquire them; therefore, invites the Commission to investigate how the Community could help SMEs to become more resource and energy efficient;

89. Reiterates the importance accorded to the corporate social responsibility of small-scale businesses, which necessitates horizontal links, networks and services; considers it ineffective to refer to the European Environmental Management and Audit system certification, both because this will detract from existing certificates, and because it links in solely with the environmental challenge;

90. Welcomes recent initiatives to assist SMEs in coping with environmental legislation, by inter alia granting them reduced agency fees, ensuring their access to information on environmental standards or introducing specific exemptions from Community legislation;

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91. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council, the Commission and the governments and parliaments of the Member States.
