

€25 million of loans for cultural and creative SMEs in the Czech Republic

The European Investment Fund and Komerční banka (KB) have signed a guarantee agreement for Czech businesses supported by the new [Cultural and Creative Sectors Guarantee Facility](#) under the EU's Creative Europe programme. The guarantee agreement will allow KB to widen its support for Czech small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the cultural and creative sectors perceived to be more risky, reaching out to currently underserved sub-sectors including audio-visual, digital games, design and start-ups active in the creative digital content industry, with €25 million of loans over three years. Andrus **Ansip**, Vice-President for the Digital Single Market, said: *"The cultural and creative sector is one of the fastest growing sectors in the European economy, yet creative SMEs face difficulties in accessing finance. Through this agreement, the Creative Europe programme will help cultural and creative Czech companies get easier access to loans. Greater access to finance will allow them to invest in scaling up their activities and to undertake bigger projects in film, music, books, video games and many more creative sectors."* In total, around 700 SMEs in the cultural and creative sectors are expected to obtain access to finance as a result of this new Guarantee Facility. This agreement was made possible with the support of the European Fund for Strategic Investments (EFSI), the central pillar of the [Investment Plan for Europe](#), the **Juncker Plan**. You can find the press release [here](#). (For more information: Nathalie Vandystadt – Tel.: +32 229 56172; Siobhán Millbright – Tel.: +32 229 57361; Julia-Henriette Bräuer – Tel.: +32 229 80707)

Employment, Social Policy and Consumers Council: agreement on European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships

At today's Employment, Social Policy and Consumers Council, Member States reached an agreement on a European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships. On this occasion, Marianne **Thyssen**, Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs, Skills and Labour Mobility, said: *"I warmly welcome today's agreement by Member States on the establishment of a European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships. Since the launch of the Skills Agenda for Europe, I have made it my mission to advocate in favour of vocational education and training, including apprenticeships. [...]. This new European framework will be useful for the many Member States that are introducing or upgrading their apprenticeship programmes, as it will guide the policymakers to make sure that apprenticeships indeed deliver on their potential. [...] This is an important step for vocational education and training in Europe. I am looking forward to assisting the Member States in putting the agreement into practice, and hope for involvement of and cooperation with the social partners."* The [proposal for a European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeship](#) was presented by the Commission in the context of the Skills Agenda for Europe. The full statement is available

[here](#). This morning, Ministers also discussed the [2018 European Semester country reports](#), the [upcoming Tripartite Social Summit](#) and the future of social Europe post-2020. Over a working dinner, Ministers will discuss the [implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights](#), and more specifically the promotion of equal labour market participating for women and men. This afternoon, Commissioner for Justice, Consumers and Gender Equality, Vera **Jourová**, will join the meeting to discuss the gender pay gap in the context of the [Pillar of Social Rights](#). Finally, Ministers will be briefed the [Commission's social fairness package](#), presented on 13 March. The EPSCO meeting will be concluded by a press conference around 16:30, with Commissioner **Thyssen** and Bulgarian Minister for Labour and Social Policy, Mr Biser Petkov. The press conference will be web streamed [here](#). (For more information: Christian Wigand – Tel.: +32 229 62253; Sara Soumillion – Tel.: +32 229 67094)

Erasmus+ goes virtual

The European Commission has today launched [Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange](#), a project to promote intercultural dialogue and improve the skills of at least 25,000 young people through digital learning tools over the next two years. The project will connect young people, youth workers, students and academics from European countries and the Southern neighbourhood of the EU through moderated discussions, transnational project groups, open online courses and advocacy training. Commissioner for Education, Culture, Youth and Sport, Tibor **Navracsics**, said: *"While a very successful programme, Erasmus+ is not always accessible to everyone. Through Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange we will facilitate more contacts between people, reach youth from different social backgrounds and promote intercultural understanding. This online tool will connect more young people from the EU with their peers from other countries; it will build bridges and help develop skills such as critical thinking, media literacy, foreign languages and teamwork."* [The](#) project which will complement the traditional physical mobility programme covers the 33 Erasmus+ programme countries and the Southern Mediterranean region covering Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Syria and Tunisia. A full press release is available [online](#). (For more information: Nathalie Vandystadt – Tel.: +32 229 67083; Joseph Waldstein – Tel.: +32 229 56184)

Des millions d'écoliers européens reçoivent du lait, des fruits et des légumes grâce à l'Union européenne

Au cours de l'année scolaire 2016-2017, 12,2 millions d'enfants de 79 000 écoles ont bénéficié du programme de l'UE "fruits et légumes à l'école", et environ 18 millions d'enfants ont participé au programme de l'UE "lait à l'école", soit plus de 30 millions d'écoliers au total. Cela représente plus de 74 000 tonnes de fruits et légumes et 285 000 tonnes de produits laitiers, distribués principalement aux enfants âgés de 6 à 10 ans. Outre la distribution de ces produits, le [programme de l'UE à destination des écoles](#) encourage des habitudes alimentaires saines chez les enfants et comprend des

programmes pédagogiques ciblés expliquant l'importance d'une bonne nutrition ainsi que la manière dont les denrées alimentaires sont produites. M. Phil **Hogan**, Commissaire européen à l'agriculture, a déclaré: «Les agriculteurs européens nous offrent des produits de grande qualité, sains et sûrs, et grâce au programme "fruits, légumes et lait dans les écoles", les plus jeunes citoyens européens reçoivent des produits bons pour la santé, tout en apprenant très tôt comment ils sont produits, ainsi que l'importance de la nutrition et du goût. La Commission est fière de contribuer à cette expérience pédagogique. Une enveloppe de 250 millions d'euros provenant de la politique agricole commune permettra d'assurer le déroulement continu de ce programme de l'Union durant l'année scolaire 2018-2019.» Le programme prévoit, pour chaque année scolaire, 150 millions d'euros pour les fruits et légumes et 100 millions pour le lait et les produits laitiers. Les enveloppes nationales des 28 États membres participant au programme durant l'année scolaire 2018-2019 viennent d'être approuvées et devraient être adoptées par la Commission européenne avant la fin du mois de mars. Un [communiqué de presse](#) est en ligne dans toutes les langues. (Pour plus d'information: Enrico Brivio – Tel: +32 2 29 56172; Clémence Robin – Tel: +32 229 52 509)

EU supports the activities of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) with €82 million

Today the European Union has made available €82 million for the 2018 operating budget of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East ([UNRWA](#)). This funding will provide access to education for 500,000 children, primary health care for more than 3.5 million patients and assistance to over 250,000 vulnerable refugees. High Representative/Vice-President Federica **Mogherini** said: "Millions of people – men, women and children – depend on UNRWA for vital services: education, healthcare and social services, humanitarian assistance and employment. Supporting UNRWA is a humanitarian and political duty. It is in our collective interest of building peace and security in the Middle East and for the prospects of a negotiated two-state solution. I have shared this message of urgency with our partners participating in today's meeting in Rome, dedicated to UNRWA's funding crisis. As the Agency faces difficult times, we are – and we will continue to be – strong, consistent and reliable supporters of its work". Commissioner for Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, Johannes **Hahn**, stated: "Today's substantial contribution reaffirms the European Union's longstanding commitment to support UNRWA's work providing basic services to Palestine refugees. We are advancing our payment for financial support to UNRWA for 2018, worth €82 million, as the Agency is facing critical moments. UNRWA needs to receive adequate and predictable resources, and I am happy to confirm that the EU will maintain its high level of contribution in both 2019 and 2020. We are working with the Agency on restructuring and reform, but its core tasks remain essential." The full [press release](#) is available online. (For more information: Maja Kocijančič – Tel.: +32 229 86570; Alceo Smerilli – Tel.: +32 229 64887; Lauranne Devillé – Tel.: +32 229 80833)

TRADE: Commission reports on progress in trade talks with Mercosur and

Indonesia

As part of its commitment to a transparent trade policy, the Commission today published reports from the latest negotiating rounds with [Indonesia](#) and [Mercosur](#). The round reports include information about progress in all areas of the respective negotiations. As regards Mercosur, the report concerns talks held from 21 February to 2 March. Although much progress was made during that period there is still work to be done, and the chief negotiators remain now in contact to explore how to move forward on the remaining issues and advance into the very last stretch of negotiations. As for Indonesia, the report refers to the fourth round of talks held from 19 to 23 February. The Commission presented on this occasion new text proposals that are now also publically available: one related to [rules of origin](#) and the other regarding [technical barriers to trade in the automotive sector](#). The aim in the negotiations is to achieve an ambitious and mutually beneficial trade agreement, including necessary guarantees to support sustainable development. The EU and Indonesia agreed to hold the next round of talks in Brussels before summer, at a date yet to be confirmed. For more information about both negotiations, see dedicated [Mercosur](#) and [Indonesia](#) webpages. *(For more information: Enrico Brivio – Tel: +32 2 29 56172; Kinga Malinowska – Tel: +32 229 51 383)*

European Youth Orchestra: Commission welcomes European Parliament's vote guaranteeing funding until 2020

The European Commission welcomes today's vote by the European Parliament, which secures the funding for the [European Youth Orchestra](#) until 2020, through an amendment to the Regulation on the [Creative Europe programme](#). [The Orchestra](#), founded in 1976, provides regular training and performance opportunities for young musicians all over Europe and confirms the vital role of culture and education in spreading the European spirit of freedom, creativity and openness. Today's decision guarantees a legally sound and transparent solution for sustainable financial support for [the Orchestra](#), taking account of its specific features and its role in enriching the cultural heritage of Europe. *(For more information: Nathalie Vandystadt – Tel. [+32 229 67083](#); Joseph Waldstein – Tel. [+32 229 56184](#))*

La Commission approuve une nouvelle indication géographique protégée d'Allemagne

La Commission européenne a approuvé la demande d'inscription de la «[Beelitzer Spargel](#)» dans le registre des indications géographiques protégées (IGP). La «Beelitzer Spargel» est une asperge, blanche ou verte, cultivée autour de la ville de Beelitz dans l'arrondissement de Potsdam-Mittelmark et dans une partie de l'arrondissement de Teltow-Fläming, à l'est de l'Allemagne. Les bonnes conditions de culture et la croissance rapide due au sol sablonneux et au climat continental favorisent la culture d'un produit tendre qui se caractérise par un goût équilibré sans amertume excessive. Les «Beelitzer Spargel» jouissent d'une longue tradition qui a été fondée par le maître vitrier et petit exploitant Karl Friedrich Wilhelm Hermann qui, en 1861, a planté les premières asperges en plein champ à Beelitz. Les premières «Beelitzer Spargel» ont été vendues en grandes quantités à partir de 1870 sur

le marché de la ville. L'asperge est entre temps devenue à nos jours la plus importante culture maraîchère du Land de Brandenburg. Cette nouvelle appellation va rejoindre plus de 1425 produits déjà protégés dont la liste est disponible dans la base de données [DOOR](#). Pour plus d'informations, voir aussi les pages sur la [politique de qualité](#). (Pour plus d'information: Enrico Brivio – Tel: +32 2 29 56172; Clémence Robin – Tel: +32 229 52 509)

Mergers: Commission clears acquisition of Stark by Lone Star

The European Commission has approved, under the EU Merger Regulation, the acquisition of sole control over Stark Group A/S ('Stark') of Denmark by Lone Star of the US. Stark is a retailer and distributor of building materials in the Nordic region. Lone Star is a private equity firm which operates globally. It controls the building material manufacturers Xella and Fermacell, and the carpet producer Balta. The Commission examined the impact of the proposed transaction on the markets where Lone Star and Stark are active, in particular the wholesale markets for building materials such as autoclaved aerated concrete (AAC) blocks and gypsum fibre boards (GFB) panels, and the retail market for such products in the Nordic countries. The Commission concluded that the vertical links created by the transaction in the Nordic countries would raise no competition concerns because of i) Lone Star's low share of retailers' overall sales; ii) the availability of alternatives for Lone Star's products; and iii) Stark's moderate position in the retail market in the Nordic countries. The Commission also concluded that the potential horizontal overlap in Denmark would raise no competition concerns due to the presence of alternative competitors after the proposed acquisition. The transaction was examined under the normal merger review procedure. More information is available on the Commission's [competition](#) website, in the public [case register](#) under case number [M.8733](#). (For more information: Ricardo Cardoso – Tel.: +32 229 80100; Maria Sarantopoulou – Tel.: +32 229 13740)

Mergers: Commission clears the acquisition of BGL Holdings Ltd by CPP Investment Board

The European Commission has approved, under the EU Merger Regulation, the acquisition of joint control over BGL Holdings Ltd of the UK by BHL Holdings Ltd of Guernsey and CPP Investment Board of Canada. BGL Holdings Ltd, currently solely controlled by BHL Holdings, distributes insurance products via price comparison websites in the UK and France and via its distribution division in the UK. BHL Holdings Ltd is mainly active in insurance underwriting, reinsurance and price comparison websites. CPP Investment Board is an investment management organisation investing the funds of the Canada Pension Plan Fund mainly in public equities, private equities, real estate and infrastructure. The Commission concluded that the proposed transaction would raise no competition concerns given the lack of overlaps and the minor vertical relationships between the companies' activities. The transaction was examined under the simplified merger review procedure. More information is available on the Commission's [competition](#) website, in the public [case register](#) under the case number [M.8752](#). (For more information: Ricardo

Cardoso – Tel.: +32 229 80100; Maria Sarantopoulou – Tel.: +32 229 13740)

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Commissioner Andriukaitis in Denmark

On 15-16 March, Vytenis **Andriukaitis**, Commissioner for Health and Food safety will be visiting Denmark. On Thursday, Commissioner **Andriukaitis** will be in Odense to meet with Ms Stephanie Lose, President of the Regional Council of Southern Denmark. Commissioner will then participate in a Citizens' Dialogue that will be webstreamed [here](#). On Friday, in Copenhagen, Commissioner will meet with Ms Ellen Trane Nørby, Minister of Health, and Mr Esben Lunde Larsen, Minister for the Environment and Food, as well as with members of the Danish Parliament. Commissioner will also hold meetings with the coordinators of the European Reference Networks, with researchers at the Panum Institute Faculty of Health and Medical Science and then attend the Annual Congress of the European Association of Urology. *"I am looking forward to the opportunity to present our flagship project – the European Reference Networks. The European Reference Networks are innovative cross-border networks of medical specialists that help diagnose and treat patients suffering from rare and complex diseases across Europe. Although the main focus of the Networks is still on diagnosis and treatment, the gathering and sharing of knowledge is equally important. We are currently working to unlock the potential of the European Reference Networks to build registries, develop guidelines and facilitate large clinical studies in the future."* said Commissioner **Andriukaitis** ahead of the visit. (For more information: Anca Paduraru – Tel.: +32 229 91269; Aikaterini Apostola – Tel.: +32 229 87624)

Citizens' Dialogue in Stockholm – Commissioner Bulc talks decarbonisation, digitalisation and the future of Europe

On 16 March, Commissioner for Transport Violeta **Bulc** will be in Stockholm, Sweden where she is participating in a Citizens' Dialogue. She will be joined on stage by Tomas Eneroth, Swedish Minister for Infrastructure. The dialogue will focus on the key priorities in transport such as Europe's road to decarbonisation and the digitalisation of the sector, as well as a discussion looking at the future of Europe. Citizens' Dialogues are a regular feature of the daily work of the Juncker Commission. All Members of the Commission travel to regions and cities across Europe to engage in dialogue with citizens and listen to their views and expectations concerning the future of the Union. To date, over 500 dialogues were held all over Europe. The Citizens' Dialogue, with some 150 guests, takes place at 11:30 am at the House of Europe and can be followed [live](#). (For more information: Enrico Brivio – Tel.: +32 229 56172; Iris Petsa – Tel.: +32 229 93321)

Commissioner Stylianides travels to Colombia

Commissioner for Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Management, Christos **Stylianides**, will visit Colombia over **15-17 March**. Ahead of the mission, Commissioner **Stylianides** said: *"The EU is a key partner of Colombia and the region. I look forward to visiting EU-funded humanitarian aid projects in the country and meet with Government officials and local communities."* More on the EU's humanitarian aid to [Colombia](#) and to [South America](#) is available online. A press release will be published with more details on the mission in the coming days. (For more information: Carlos Martin Ruiz De Gordejuela – Tel.: +32 229 65322; Daniel Puglisi – Tel.: +32 229 69140)

[Upcoming events](#) of the European Commission (ex-Top News)