Preparation of the Eurogroup and ECOFIN meetings, Luxembourg 15-16 June 2017

Vice-President Dombrovskis and Commissioner Moscovici will represent the European Commission at today's Eurogroup and tomorrow's ECOFIN meetings. The Eurogroup will consider the next steps towards concluding the second review of the stability support programme for Greece and will continue its discussion on the sustainability of Greece's public debt. As part of the thematic discussions on jobs and growth, ministers will continue their discussion on how to improve the quality and sustainability of public finances. Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Christine Lagarde, will present the IMF’s assessment of the euro area's economic situation, while the European Commission, the Chair of the Single Resolution Board and the Vice-Chair of the ECB Supervisory Board will inform ministers about the recent European bank resolution case. The meeting will be followed by a press conference with Commissioner Moscovici. At tomorrow's ECOFIN meeting, ministers are expected to agree on new EU rules to allow e-publications to benefit from the same reduced VAT rates available to their printed equivalents and will also discuss a proposal for a generalised VAT reverse charge mechanism in the EU.

Ahead of trilogues with the European Parliament, the Council will try to come to an agreement on its negotiating mandate on two Banking Union proposals: new rules for the ranking of unsecured debt instruments and transitional arrangements for the introduction of new international financial reporting standards. In addition, the Council is expected to approve European Semester Country-Specific Recommendations for 2017, close Excessive Deficit Procedures for Croatia and Portugal and endorse a revised Code of Conduct of the Stability and Growth Pact. Finally, ministers will hold an exchange of views on the Mid-term Review of the Capital Markets Union. Vice-President Dombrovskis will participate in the press conference following the ECOFIN session.

EUROSTAT: Consumer price levels in 2016 - Price levels varied by almost one to three across the EU Member States - Widest gap for "Restaurants & hotels" and "Alcohol & tobacco"

In 2016, price levels for consumer goods and services differed widely in the European Union (EU). Denmark (139% of the EU average) had the highest price level, followed by Ireland (125%), Luxembourg and Sweden (both 124%), Finland and the United Kingdom (both 121%). At the opposite end of the scale, the lowest price level was found in Bulgaria (48%), while Poland (53%) and Romania (52%) were just above 50% the average. In other words, price levels for consumer goods and services in the EU varied by almost one to three between the cheapest and the most expensive Member State.

Full text available here
EUROSTAT: April 2017 - Euro area international trade in goods surplus €17.9 bn - €0.1 bn deficit for EU28

The first estimate for euro area (EA19) exports of goods to the rest of the world in April 2017 was €167.7 billion, a decrease of 3% compared with April 2016 (€172.5 bn). Imports from the rest of the world stood at €149.8 bn, a rise of 3% compared with April 2016 (€145.9 bn). As a result, the euro area recorded a €17.9 bn surplus in trade in goods with the rest of the world in April 2017, compared with +€26.6 bn in April 2016. Intra-euro area trade stood at €144.7 bn in April 2017, nearly stable compared with April 2016.

Full text available here

EU celebrates end of roaming charges while Commission will watch the implementation carefully

Today is a historic day. From now on, high roaming bills for Europeans will be confined to history. "Eliminating roaming charges is one of the greatest and most tangible successes of the EU", President Juncker, President of the European Parliament Antonio Tajani and Prime Minister of Malta Joseph Muscat stated. It demonstrates that "the European Union is about bringing people together and making their lives easier. (...) Operators have had 2 years to prepare for the end of roaming charges, and we are confident that they will seize the opportunities the new rules bring to the benefit of their customers" they said in their joint statement. The work does not stop here however. The Commission will continue to carefully watch the implementation of the new rules, and make sure that Europeans fully benefit from them and that the European market remains competitive. An overview of the new roaming rules is available on the roaming website. Details on how 'roam like at home' works in practice are available in all official EU languages in the frequently asked questions, general factsheet, and a detailed factsheet. The end of roaming charges in the EU is at the top of the agenda for the Digital Assembly – a two-day conference organised by the Maltese Presidency and the Commission, currently under way in Malta. Vice-President for the Digital Single Market Andrus Ansip will deliver a keynote speech (at around 14:45, web streamed here and later).

EU announces €143 million support package for the crisis in North East Nigeria

The European Commission has announced a support package of €143 million today for the early recovery and reconstruction needs in Borno State in Nigeria which is suffering from a worsening humanitarian crisis. Commissioner for International Cooperation and Development, Neven Mimica, said: "Our support package of €143 million will assist approximately 1.3 million internally displaced people and affected communities in and around the Borno State in Nigeria. Our assistance will not only target the immediate needs of the people but, it will also help to restore basic services, stimulate employment and create livelihood opportunities, particularly for women and young people." Commissioner for Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Management, Christos Stylianides added: "The European Union is committed to get lifesaving aid to those in need in Nigeria. Emergency aid can help them but to do so aid organisations need safe and full access to do their job. We also need to think about the long term affects and how to help communities recover. I have visited the country several times and seen the suffering caused by the victims of terrorism but also the strength and determination of the local people to rebuild their lives. It is this desire to rebuild a better future that the EU will support." This brings total EU support for the crisis in Nigeria's Borno state to €224.5 million for 2017, following earlier announcements of €81.5 million in humanitarian aid. Read the full press release here.

Education: New report shows need to better support teaching in higher education
Teaching staff at universities and other higher education institutions are rarely provided with high quality training focusing on teaching skills. This is one of the findings of the 'Modernisation of Higher Education in Europe: Academic Staff 2017' report published today by the European Commission's Eurydice network. This report is a first mapping of the situation of academic staff in higher education institutions across 35 European countries. Tibor Navracsics, EU Commissioner for Education, Culture, Youth and Sport, said: "This report shows how important it is to invest in the teaching capacities of academic staff. The Commission's recently adopted renewed EU agenda for higher education can help Member States in this. It proposes actions to improve academic teaching, for instance by strengthening cooperation between teacher training centres across the EU and providing more mobility opportunities focused on pedagogical training. Better supporting teachers is crucial in building high quality education systems that deliver for young people from all backgrounds." Other key findings point to a lack of national strategies for human resource planning in higher education leading to mismatches between staff and student numbers; an increase in job insecurity among academic staff; imbalances in the opportunities open to junior academics compared with their more senior colleagues; and underrepresentation of women in the academic world, especially among the higher ranks. In terms of internationalisation of higher education, academics increasingly participate in joint international programmes or teach in other languages, but there is a long way to go as regards the use of accessible online resources, concludes the report.

Commission welcomes agreement on EU Macro-Financial Assistance to Moldova

The European Commission welcomes the endorsement by the Council of the agreement reached with the European Parliament to provide Macro-Financial Assistance (MFA) to Moldova worth EUR 100 million. Under the assistance, which was proposed by the Commission in January 2017, the country would receive up to EUR 40 million in grants and up to EUR 60 million in medium-term loans at favourable financing conditions. This operation is a significant opportunity to help Moldova address its macroeconomic challenges and meet its short-term financing needs. Under the terms of the agreement, the assistance would be strictly conditional on good progress with the IMF programme and on implementing key conditions to be agreed with Moldova in a Memorandum of Understanding. The Commission also welcomes today's joint statement adopted by the three institutions and included in the compromise text, which reiterates that respecting effective democratic mechanisms, including a multi-party parliamentary system and the rule of law, remains a pre-condition throughout the lifecycle of the macro-financial assistance.

Mergers: Commission clears acquisition of Vitanas by Oaktree

The European Commission has approved under the EU Merger Regulation the acquisition of sole control over Burkart Healthcare Real Estate Beteiligungsholding GmbH, Vitanas Holding GmbH and PUW Pflegenundwohnen Beteiligungs GmbH (jointly referred as "Vitanas"), all of Germany, by Oaktree Capital Group, LLC of the U.S., by way of purchase of shares. Vitanas is a private nursing care provider in the German market, offering a full spectrum of care services. Oaktree is a globally active investment management company headquartered in Los Angeles. The Commission concluded that the proposed acquisition would not raise competition concerns, because of its limited impact on the market structure. 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.8476.

ANNOUNCEMENTS
Commissioners Avramopoulos, Jourová and King in Malta for EU-US Justice and Home Affairs Ministerial meeting

Commissioner for Migration, Home Affairs and Citizenship Dimitris Avramopoulos, Commissioner for Justice, Consumers and Gender Equality Věra Jourová and Commissioner for the Union Security Julian King will be in Valetta, Malta today and tomorrow to represent the EU together with the Maltese Minister of Home Affairs and National Security Michael Farrugia and Minister for Justice, Culture and Local Government Owen Bonnici, on behalf of the Maltese Presidency, at the EU-US Justice and Home Affairs Ministerial meeting. The U.S. will be represented by Attorney General Jeff Sessions and Deputy Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security Elaine C. Duke. The meeting, which is held twice a year to advance transatlantic cooperation in the area of Justice and Home Affairs, will focus on the fight against terrorism, aviation security, criminal justice in cyberspace, transnational organised crime, border management, migration and visa reciprocity.

First Vice-President Timmermans visits the Czech Republic

On Thursday 15 and Friday 16 June, First Vice-President Frans Timmermans will be in Prague, Czech Republic, where he will meet bilaterally with Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka and with Minister for Foreign Affairs Lubomír Zaorálek. The First Vice-President will also participate in the Prague European Summit, taking part in an on-stage discussion with Minister Zaorálek.

Commissioner Hahn in Azerbaijan

Johannes Hahn, Commissioner for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations will visit Azerbaijan on 16 June in order to prepare for the Eastern Partnership Summit. Ahead of the mission, Commissioner Hahn said: "I am visiting Azerbaijan, an important partner for the European Union, to discuss the Eastern Partnership Summit and how to best broaden and deepen our cooperation in the near future. The European Union is ready to support Azerbaijan with its efforts to achieve substantial economic and democratic transformation, involving civil society in this process". Commissioner Hahn will meet with high-level state representatives to discuss the ongoing negotiations of the new EU-Azerbaijan agreements as well as the Partnership Priorities and future areas of cooperation. Commissioner Hahn will address Human Rights issues with all interlocutors. He will further meet private sector representatives and International Financial Institutions to follow up on the EU-Azerbaijan Business Forum, which took place in Baku on 8 June. A visit to the Port of Baku will provide the opportunity for an exchange on issues related to transport and interconnection. Commissioner Hahn will also meet with civil society representatives. Videos and photos of the visit will be available on EbS. A factsheet on EU – Azerbaijan relations is available online.

Commissioner Stylianides in Cyprus on 16 June

Commissioner for Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Management Christos Stylianides will visit Cyprus tomorrow to present the White Paper on the Future of Europe during the national Parliament's plenary session. The White Paper sets out the main challenges and opportunities for Europe in the coming decade. It presents five scenarios for how the Union could evolve by 2025 depending on how it chooses to respond. To encourage this debate, the European Commission, together with the European Parliament and interested Member States, is hosting a series of 'Future of Europe Debates' across Europe's cities and regions. Commissioner Stylianides will also meet with the Speaker of the House of Representatives of the Republic of Cyprus and members of government.
Commissioner Navracsics on visit to Bulgaria

Commissioner for Education, Culture, Youth and Sport, Tibor Navracsics, is currently visiting Varna, Bulgaria. Yesterday evening he attended a dinner hosted by Lilyana Pavlova, Minister for the EU Presidency, and Krasen Kralev, Minister of Youth and Sport, for discussions on the upcoming Bulgarian Presidency of the EU. Today, the Commissioner will officially open "Youth Spaces", the annual meeting of Bulgarian youth organisations co-organised by the Bulgarian National Youth Forum, Varna Municipality and the Varna 2017 European Youth Capital organisation. He will also have meetings with Krasimir Valtchev, Minister of Education and Science, and the rectors of Varna's six universities where the Commission's recent communication on a renewed agenda for higher education and the proposal for a Council Recommendation on graduate tracking will be discussed. Commissioner Navracsics will also meet Varna University alumni who have become successful entrepreneurs as well as Ivan Portnih, Mayor of Varna. The Commissioner's visit will finish with a Citizens' Dialogue on education and training, opportunities for young people, cultural activities and the future of Europe alongside the President of Bulgaria, Rumen Radev, and Minister Kralev. The Citizens' Dialogue can be followed live on 15 June at 16.15 (EEST) here.

Find out here what will be discussed next week in the European Commission, the European Council and the European Parliament.