



Citizens Signpost Service

Activity report - July 2002 - June 2003

Internal Market Directorate General, Unit A3 : Internal and external communication

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A blurred, light blue-tinted photograph of a crowd of people walking, likely in a public space or transit area. The figures are out of focus, creating a sense of movement and a busy environment.

Citizens Signpost Service



Introduction

The new version of the Citizens Signpost Service (CSS) started up in July 2002.

The CSS is one of the components which form part of the European Commission Internal Market DG's external communication policy. It ties in very well with the issue of intra-European mobility as it looks into the problems encountered by European citizens when they exercise their rights within the internal market. It is an excellent instrument for analysing how European legislation is actually implemented, thus helping to identify the problems which still exist.

It is a snapshot of the day-to-day life of our fellow Europeans.

A flick through the pages of this first activity report will reveal the scope of the service offered by the CSS and how it operates.

The purpose of this document is to take stock of the results achieved by the CSS during its first year and, at the same time, to inform you of the problems encountered by European citizens providing feedback to the units and directorates involved. To help you, all the topics and sub-topics raised by citizens have been included in this document.

The second year of the CSS's existence will be a very important one. The CSS will be extended to the new Member States and the service offered to citizens will be improved by developing the technical operation of our database and carrying out quality control at all levels.

The inclusion of the service in the Commission's future "Your Europe" Internet portal will raise its profile and require an even better quality of service than is currently offered.

We hope that you will help us broadcast this information and spread the word about this service, always near at hand, set up by the European Commission for the citizens of Europe.



Acknowledgements

ECAS and its experts, our contractor, for a successful first year of the CSS.

The Publications Office, and particularly Berthold Huber, for the quality of the work on the technical development of the Citizens Signpost Service.

The Directorate-General for Press and Communication, and especially the Europe Direct team, for their assistance.

All our colleagues for their support in setting up this initiative.

The CSS is coordinated by Anthony Dempsey, Head of Unit, Graça Barbedo, team leader, Luc Joosten, management and quality control, and Luc Debeer, technical coordination,

Angelo Sarno, graphic designer.

The Citizens Signpost Service is closely linked to the "Dialogue with Citizens" Internet site (<http://europa.eu.int/citizensrights>) which, in the course of 2004, will become part of a new portal "Your Europe" (<http://europa.eu.int/youreurope>) developed in collaboration with the Enterprise Directorate-General.



Target group

The CSS is aimed at European citizens...

The CSS is aimed at European citizens who encounter problems with mobility in the internal market.

Its objective

The CSS is an advisory service...

The CSS is an advisory service which gives practical advice to European citizens on specific problems they encounter in exercising their rights within the internal market.

The service is free.

The reply provided by multilingual legal experts¹ is personalised, impartial, objective, and quick². They clarify the rules which apply and direct the citizen towards whichever body can best help solve the problem. They provide citizens with information on how to assert their rights and obtain redress.

Replies are given by telephone or e-mail in the citizen's mother tongue or one of the other eleven official languages of the European Union, as requested by the citizen.

The CSS works alongside other Commission services involved in problem-solving, such as SOLVIT³ and Fin-Net⁴.

It operates in conjunction with the Commission's "Dialogue with citizens" website which offers guides and national factsheets containing a wealth of detailed information adapted to the needs of citizens in the internal market.

The CSS experts enter the cases handled into a database run by the Commission. These cases are used for Interactive Policy Making (IPM)⁵. This IPM initiative aims to define and implement best Community practices by gathering information on the specific problems encountered by citizens and enterprises on a day-to-day basis.

How do citizens contact the CSS ?

The CSS can be contacted...

The CSS can be contacted in two different ways:

- ▶ directly: via our electronic form which is available on line (http://europa.eu.int/citizensrights/signpost/front_end/signpost_en.htm);
- ▶ indirectly: specific questions recorded by Europe Direct are forwarded to the CSS (freephone number : 00-800-6 7 8 9 10 11).

1 On 15 August, ECAS had 33 legal experts for the 15 Member States.

2 Allowing for holidays in Belgium and the expert's home country, the reply can be given within 3 - 8 days.

3 SOLVIT : http://europa.eu.int/comm/internal_market/solvit/

4 Fin-Net : http://europa.eu.int/comm/internal_market/fr/finances/consumer/adr.htm

5 The European Commission's Interactive Policy Making initiative consists of 2 Internet-based instruments: the feedback mechanism and the on-line consultation mechanism. (<http://europa.eu.int/yourvoice/ipm/>)

How does this work ?

Citizens enter their personal details in their own language...

Citizens enter their personal details in their own language and explain their problem on an electronic form available on the "Dialogue with Citizens" site⁶. The information is collected in a database.

The Europe Direct⁷ service sends on to the CSS any complex questions it receives with regard to citizens exercising their rights in the EU internal market. These data are transmitted on the basis of eligibility criteria applied to these questions (see below). They are transferred daily to the CSS database for processing.

The database entries are sorted on the basis of pre-defined eligibility criteria. Questions from consultancies or legal practices, for example, are automatically rejected.

The questions are sent to ECAS⁸ and its legal experts. ECAS has selected one or more experts for each Member State.

ECAS transmits the eligible questions to one of its experts. The latter has to reply to the citizen within the contracted deadline. The replies are entered into the CSS database in the language in which the inquiry was made, accompanied by a translation in French or English. In this reply, the expert will inform the citizen of the different ways of solving his/her problem and which services to contact, be these national or associated with European initiatives such as SOLVIT⁹ or Fin-net¹⁰.

The experts also enter information, apart from the personal details, to be used by the IPM database to ensure information is fed back to the Commission and its services.

It is planned to extend the service to the new Member States as of 1 May 2004.

⁶ http://europa.eu.int/citizensrights/signpost/front_end/signpost_en.htm

⁷ Europe Direct offers information on all sorts of subjects related to the EU, including information about your rights and opportunities as an EU citizen, and how to take advantage of them. It can also give you direct answers to general questions or, if you have more specific questions, direct you towards the best source of information or advice at European, national, regional and local level. Contact : <http://europa.eu.int/europedirect> or freephone number 00 800 6 7 8 9 10 11.

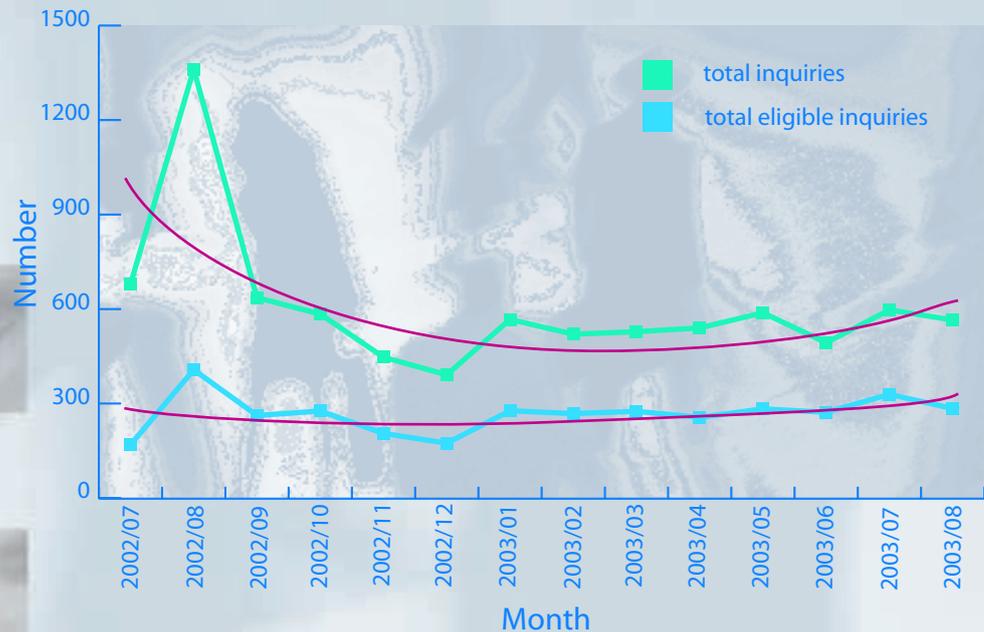
⁸ ECAS: Euro-Citizen Action Service, a non-profit making organisation and partner in the venture.

⁹ SOLVIT centres have been set up to resolve problems relating to the misapplication of Internal Market Rules by a public administration in another Member State.

¹⁰ Cross-border network for out-of-court redress for consumers in the field of financial services.



One year of the CSS



7 358 questions were put to the CSS in one year. After being examined, 3 148 of these were declared eligible.

Comments:

The aim of the CSS is to come up with practical advice on problems encountered by citizens in the context of intra-European mobility.

After the initial start-up phase which was supported up by an information campaign, the site quickly reached cruising speed. Looking at the monthly figures, there is a clear upward trend.

The number of inquiries will increase following improvements to the electronic form available on the site, with the new version coming on line during 2004, and thanks to an advertising campaign for the launch of the new site and future "Your Europe" portal.

It should be noted that some citizens currently send an e-mail rather than fill in the electronic form. Some 1 400 e-mails are received in place of forms.

If the inquiry is eligible, the citizen is asked to complete the on-line form. In other instances, the citizens are sent useful information.

Extending the service to the new Member States as of 1 May 2004 will have a positive impact and will increase the number of requests for advice.

Despite the absence of exact statistical data, it can be ascertained that requests come in from all categories of citizens – employees, the self-employed, retired persons, students and the unemployed.



Eligibility of questions :

A question submitted to the CSS...

A question submitted to the CSS must meet various eligibility criteria before it is handled by the service.

The questions should :

- relate to the internal market;
- relate to a real, and not a hypothetical, situation;
- concern a citizen (all questions from consultancies, legal practices etc. are automatically excluded);
- be specific;
- come from a European citizen (or someone closely related to a European citizen and thus enjoying many of the same rights);
- occur when exercising recognised rights.

The questions can also cover:

- a request from a citizen for interpretation or clarification of a legal text;
- a complaint about European legislation or concerning the existence or non-existence of European legislation (relating to internal market topics);
- a request for information on national legislation transposing European legislation in a Member State (relating to internal market topics).

In addition, the problem encountered by the citizen should not be one which is directly explained in a guide or one of the factsheets published as part of the "Dialogue with Citizens".

Multiple inquiries from the same citizen concerning similar situations are regarded as one and the same request in order to avoid duplication.

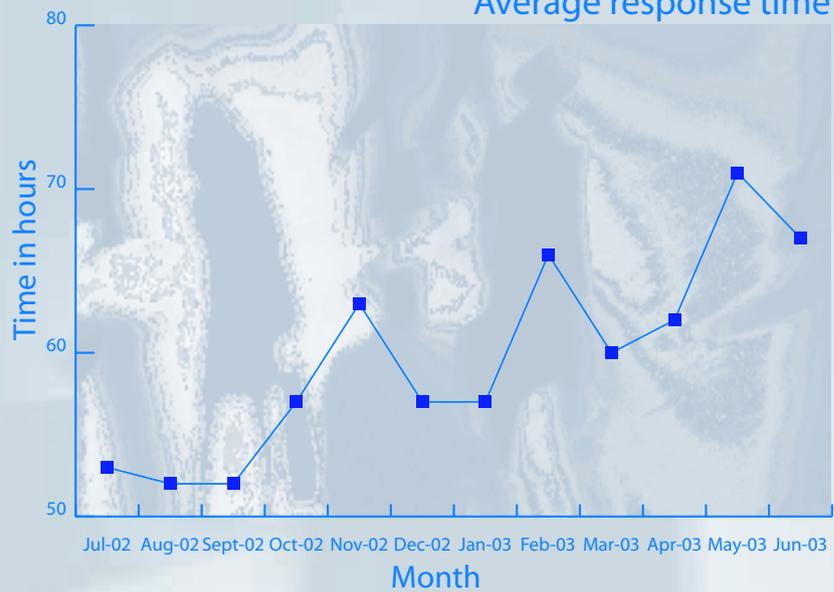
The request should be coherent and contain sufficient information and at least one question





The response time

Average response time



Comments:

The response time is one of the elements used to assess the quality of the service provided. When citizens consult the CSS, they expect to receive a reply within a reasonable deadline. On the other hand, it is necessary to ensure that the expert who receives the question is given enough time in which to prepare a reply, especially if the question is a complex one.

The service aims to give a reply within 72 hours, excluding weekends and statutory (public) holidays.

Over the year, the average response time varied between 52 and 71 hours.

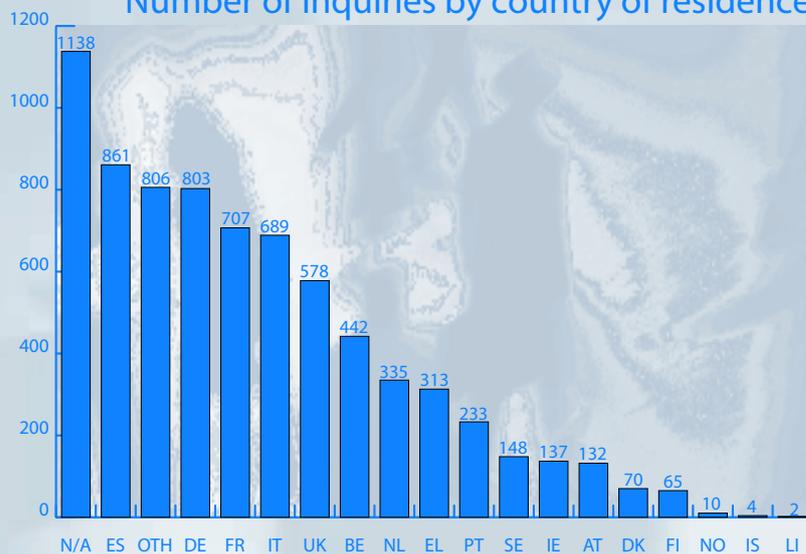
These response times would indicate that the objective was achieved.



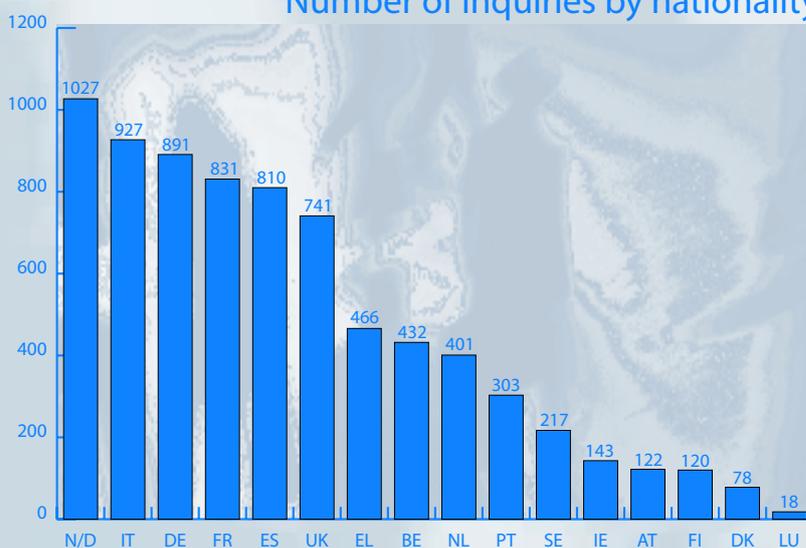


Inquiries by country of residence and by nationality

Number of inquiries by country of residence



Number of inquiries by nationality

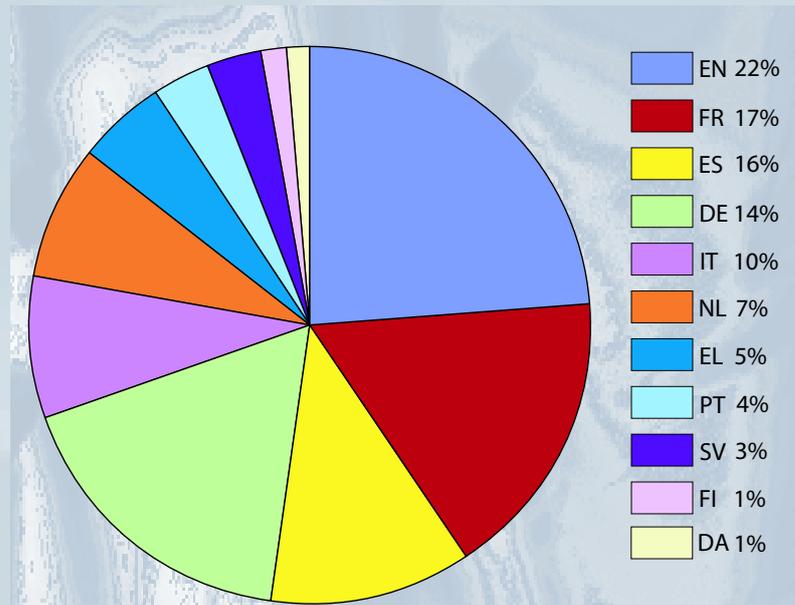


Comments:

These tables are provided for information purposes only. They have no representative value as the user is free to choose whether or not to communicate this information.



Inquiries by language



Comments:

English remains the main language used in the questionnaires transmitted, accounting for over 20% of inquiries. The other EU official languages are, however, all represented.

This lends force to the belief that providing the service in all current and future official EU languages satisfies a desire expressed by the citizen.

"Specimen cases"

Topic: problems with the recognition of qualifications

The citizen is a tennis coach. He holds a diploma as a tennis coach from another Member State. The authorities in his country of residence do not recognise his diploma. Nor have they provided him with the necessary information on whether he can appeal against this decision.

The Signpost Service explains to him that the reasons for refusing his application given by the authorities in his country of residence are not compatible with Community legislation. These authorities had also failed to let him know how to appeal against this decision or to give information on the procedures. The citizen has a right of appeal and the right to contest an administrative decision before taking legal action.

He was put in touch with the advisory service set up by lawyers in the town where he lives so that he could receive information on the possibility of an appeal at national level. The citizen consulted the signpost service once more for further details. His options were as follows: to take legal action against the national authorities, to file a complaint with the Commission Representation in his country of residence or to contact a SOLVIT centre.



The topics and sub-topics handled in eligible cases

The main topics:

Inquiries by topic



N.B.: One case can be classified in several categories.

Comments:

It is no surprise that the topics raised most frequently by our fellow Europeans concern "working" or "going to live" in another EU country and all the associated administrative procedures which have to be followed in this Member State.

For this reason, the most frequently asked questions relate to social security, the right of residence to work or study in another EU country, the right of access to employment and taxation. These are in fact very specific topics. The cases raised form part of the daily lives of our fellow Europeans and help reveal that facts or situations which may seem straightforward can sometimes lead to real problems or uncertainties.

A more detailed analysis of the sub-topics leads to the conclusion that there is a set of circumstances which have a direct impact on the quality of life of Europe's citizens and to which particular attention should be paid. The doubts which citizens have arise either because the existing legislation is not applied, or because it is too complex or misunderstood or simply because of a lack of communication and information on the internal market.

These statistical observations confirm that the vast majority of inquiries relate to social security and are made by persons working in an EU country other than their country of origin. The mobility of the labour force also lies behind the very significant number of inquiries concerning the recognition of qualifications. Another topic which crops up frequently is that of residence permits.



Identifying the sub-topics:

Working in another EU country (total of 1 998 cases)

- Social security: 804 cases
- Right of access to employment: 310 cases
- Taxes: 196 cases
- Right of residence: 195 cases
- Elements of the national education system: 139 cases
- Welfare benefits: 120 cases
- Looking for work: 86 cases
- General questions: 78 cases
- Cross-border workers: 70 cases

Living in another EU country (total of 908 cases)

- Right of residence: 435 cases
- General questions: 137 cases
- Motor vehicle tax: 96 cases
- Taxes: 81 cases
- Type-approval and registration of motor vehicles: 77 cases
- Driving licenses: 72 cases
- Right to vote and stand as a candidate in European Parliament elections: 10 cases

Studying, training and doing research in another country of the EU, recognition of qualifications (total of 374 cases)

- Other regulated professions (general system): 85 cases
- Elements of the national education system: 83 cases
- General questions: 45 cases
- General practitioners and specialist doctors: 33 cases
- Right of residence: 23 cases
- Lawyers: 19 cases
- Training and mobility of researchers: 18 cases
- Engineers: 16 cases
- Architects: 12 cases
- Teachers: 11 cases
- Dentists : 10 cases
- Nurses: 9 cases
- Paramedical professions: 6 cases
- Vets: 2 cases
- Midwives: 1 case
- Pharmacists: 1 case

Enforcing your rights in the single European market (total of 346 cases)

- Internal administrative procedures: 136 cases
- Judicial procedures: 113 cases
- Non-judicial procedures: 49 cases
- Legal aid: 26 cases
- General questions: 22 cases



Buying goods and services in the single market (total of 260 cases)

- General questions: 121 cases
- Motor vehicle insurance: 49 cases
- Unfair terms: 44 cases
- Opening a bank account in another Member State: 22 cases
- Product safety: 7 cases
- Timeshares: 7 cases
- Misleading advertising: 4 cases
- Package travel: 3 cases
- Overbooking of airline seats: 2 cases
- Door-to-door selling: 1 case



Travelling in another EU country (total of 196 cases)

- General questions : 74 cases
- Obtaining a visa for family members who are not nationals of an EU Member State 69 cases
- Notifying the authorities of your presence in another Member State: 36 cases
- Consular protection for the EU citizens: 7 cases
- Overbooking of airline seats: 5 cases
- Package travel: 5 cases



Equal rights and opportunities for men and women in the EU (total of 16 cases)



Data protection in the European Union (total of 5 cases)

"Specimen cases"

Topic: Buying goods and services in the European single market

The citizen complains about a bank established in an EU country. He believes he has lost money due to the incorrect application of European legislation by financial operators in this country. The national authorities of this Member State have ignored his complaint which relates to the contractual terms of an Internet transaction. He has received some compensation but nothing approaching the amount lost.

The citizen knows that the EU has adopted directives on unfair terms and wanted to know how to bring the matter to the attention of the European Commission.

The signpost service explained the contents of the relevant European legislation and referred him to the legislation on unfair terms in contracts, as well as to a number of proposals or initiatives on abusive trading practices and e-confidence. The CSS explained how he could use these texts in his case and how to file a complaint with the Commission, giving him the contact details of the European Consumer Centre in his country of residence.

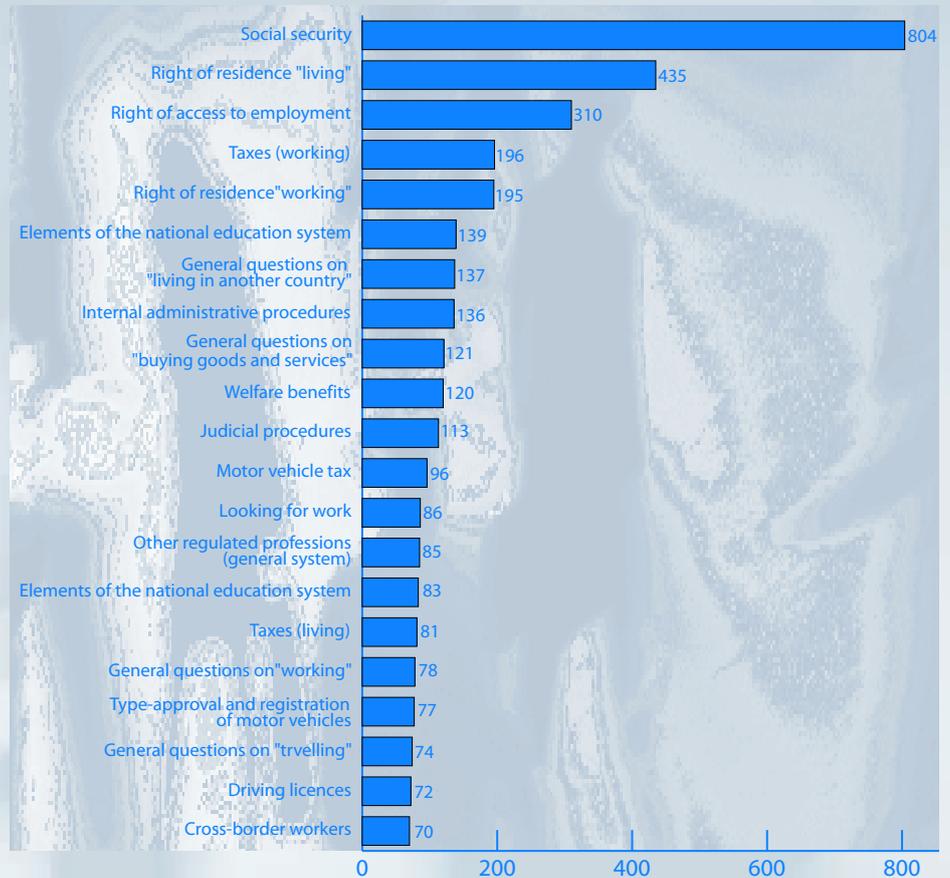
Several weeks later, the citizen got back in touch to say that he was very satisfied with the advice which he had been given and which he had followed.





Table of the top 20 topics

Table of the top 20 topics



"Specimen cases" in cases

Topic : obtaining a visa for a member of your family who is not an EU Member State national

The citizen is a Member State national. She lives in the USA, is married to an Indian national and her son has dual nationality (Indian and that of the Member State). All her other relatives live in an EU Member State. Whenever they wish to visit her family in this EU country, they have to go through a "daunting" procedure and have to pay for a visa.

She wanted to know if the Schengen Agreement allowed her husband to obtain a 5-year multiple-entry visa into the EU for family reasons, and if this visa was free for the spouse of a European citizen. The signpost service explained to her the application of the Schengen Agreement and the rules on visas for family members of a Member State national. She was given the contact details of the appropriate department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the EU country of which she is a national. Ms S. was very pleased with the information provided by the signpost service. She consulted the service again on more practical matters. The expert concluded that the authorities in the country of which she is a national had not applied Council Decision 2002/44/EC correctly. The advice given was to submit a complaint and the citizen was put in touch with the Justice and Home Affairs Directorate-General.

List of our guides and factsheets

guides :

As part of its Dialogue with citizens, the Commission has published ten practical guides which cover different aspects of Community legislation in the field of the internal market. These guides briefly explain how citizens can make the best of the opportunities offered by the internal market. They have been drawn up by the Internal Market Directorate-General with the assistance of other Commission DGs.

They cover the following topics:

- ▶ Purchasing goods and services in the single European market;
- ▶ Equal rights and opportunities for men and women in the EU;
- ▶ Studying, training and doing research in another EU country;
- ▶ Travelling in another EU country;
- ▶ Living in another EU country;
- ▶ Working in another EU country;
- ▶ FIN-NET - setting cross-border financial disputes out of court;
- ▶ Data protection in the European Union;
- ▶ Enforcing your rights in the single European market;
- ▶ Cross-border credit transfers in euro.

These guides are printed in all the official languages, and are sent out on request¹¹. They are also available on-line. One guide is published for each Member State: it contains specific information and is published in the official language(s) of that country. The guides are therefore published in eleven languages for the fifteen Member States, i.e. in 19 versions.

Factsheets:

These provide more detailed information than the guides and describe the particular situation in each Member State.

For example :

- ▶ How does one get a diploma obtained in another Member State recognised in Sweden?
- ▶ What formalities do European citizens have to go through when they move to another EU country and wish to register their private cars?

In view of the new structure planned for the update of the Dialogue with Citizens Internet site, which will be accessible in 2004, the Internal Market DG, in conjunction with the Member States and other Commission departments, has created 77 factsheets. Each new factsheet will be produced in the official language of the country concerned, as well as in English, French and German. In total, this amounts to 4 620 versions (77 factsheets x 15 Member States x 4 languages).

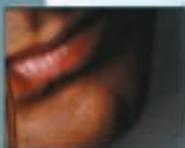
The factsheets are also available on-line, and can be printed on demand.

Factsheets for the new Member States are being drawn up and will be available in the course of 2004.



Lists of topics covered by the factsheets:

- Travelling to another EU country (package travel, overbooking in air transport, consular protection)
- Entry procedures into another EU country (workers, students, retired persons, other categories, members of the worker's family)
- Right of residence (workers, students, retired persons, other categories)
- Citizens' rights (consular protection; European Parliament elections)
- Studying in another EU country (higher education; secondary school; kindergarten and primary school; supplementary information on Community legislation)
- Recognition of qualifications (the general system; paramedical professions; teachers; engineers; lawyers; general practitioners and specialist doctors; pharmacists; dentists; midwives; veterinarians; nurses; architects; training and mobility of researchers)
- Employment (right of access to employment; how to find work)
- Social security (the objective of Community provisions; situations targeted; the single membership scheme; equal treatment; exporting of benefits; the aggregation rule; registration; social security management; personal contribution; claims; welfare benefits)
- Taxes (taxes; motor vehicle tax)
- Cross-border workers (general overview; definition; seeking work; residence conditions; sickness and maternity insurance; family benefits; workers' pensions; unemployment benefits; taxation)
- Driving licence (general overview; possible scenarios; presentation, categories and validity; issuing, withdrawal and replacement; mutual recognition; exchanging of driving licence; the right to drive)
- Driving a vehicle (delivery and registration of vehicles; car insurance; vehicle tax)
- Consumer protection (product safety; misleading advertising; door-to-door selling; unfair terms in contracts; opening a bank account in another Member State; overbooking of airline seats; package travel; part-time use of property or property assets)
- Enforcing your rights (rights of the individual; appeals to administrative authorities; non-judicial redress; judicial procedures; legal assistance/legal aid).



Conclusions

This year's balance sheet for the CSS looks very good. The new structure is proving its worth and the quality of the service provided is constantly improving. Compared to the volume of inquiries made, the service receives very few negative e-mails about its operation or the quality of the replies given.

Users who receive expert advice in their own language - or the language requested - appreciate the fact that the CSS is "close" to the citizen.

When the answer is given by telephone, the CSS experts have said that the conversations they hold with the user are instructive for both parties.

The topics raised reveal the concerns felt by our fellow citizens in the large internal market. They want to study or work abroad, experience different countries, different cultures, different mentalities and different ways of living, but they still have a lot of questions. These are often of a very practical nature: "how do I do this?", "what steps should I take to ...?". These situations give the CSS a very central role in the day-to-day lives of our fellow citizens.

It is a mutually enriching experience.

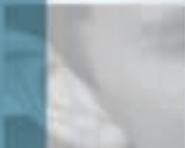
Next year will be very important for the operation of the CSS.

With the enlargement of the European Union, this service will be extended to the ten new Member States. Meticulous preparations need to be made to meet this considerable challenge.

The service will be made easier to use by improving the on-line forms to be completed by citizens and experts, and our database will be upgraded.

The inclusion of the CSS in the new "Your Europe" portal will raise our profile and require a better-quality level of service than we currently offer.

All these elements should combine to raise the quality of the service and the level of satisfaction expressed by the different user groups.



European Commission

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