ABSTRACT: Although post is part of our daily life, many of us assimilating it with the image of the postman or with a stamped letter, we are few in the position of having been given the opportunity to go beyond the counters installed in posts, for a better knowledge of the complexity of this activity. The importance of post is given by the universal service that has been acknowledged and accepted by the entire world. Its preservation has to be followed by the increase of services quality that can be achieved only through a liberalization of postal services. It is necessary to liberalize the world postal services because not all the states provide the universal service in the same way. Posts improve the quality of traditional services on the market, implement and diversify new products and services of the type of the “new economy”. Postal services liberalization supposes on one hand, the improvement of services quality, modernization, costs decrease and structure alteration, and on the other hand, it supposes a legislation that would allow responsibilities separation between governments, postal operators and regulation authorities.

KEY WORDS: postal services liberalization, universal service, postal services

The main problem presented by the organization is in defining the way to follow for maintain a performing and competitive postal environment that would continue to provide a superior quality universal service, against accessible prices to physical persons and companies in Europe, for the competitiveness economy interest, citizens’ needs, no matter their geographical location, financial status or other factors, employment and sustainable development. Who has not stayed in line at the Post Office to send a simple registered letter, asking itself why there is no alternative desk where one would wait less in exchange for an additional price? Jokes mirror reality delightfully. A child wrote Santa Claus to send him a last generation computer and some candies. He received the first part of the present due to postal workers generosity that gathered the money and bought his computer. In his answer, beside the thanks, the

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Kid added: “Santa, I know for sure that you sent me the candies, too, but those thieves at the post office must have eaten them”. Such a cliché about the post would only disappear in time. Today’s image of empty telephone cabins can only suggest the future of traditional postal desks, after the market liberalization.

To provide a minimum of postal services to poor and unfavoured people does not mean only to provide the same services to all the clients. Solidarity does not have to be mistaken to egalitarianism. To keep the monopole over the post means having only one option, one offer, just like during the times Romania had only one type of milk, one type of sugar, one type of drinkable oil, anywhere in the country.

According to the estimations of the European Commission, in EU postal services employ about 1.7 million employees and related services about 3.5 million people, being managed by about 135 million deliveries per year. In 2004, postal services achieved a turnover of 90 billion euro in EU, 1% of the GP, respectively. About two thirds of the turnover comes from letters and the rest from express packages and services, the latter being already opened for competition. In a field where costs are 80% with employees, liberalization implies major risks, first of all social ones. If we add substantial differences from a member state to another, we get the image of a very ambitious measure. For more than a decade, EU lawmakers have been preparing for the liberalization of the postal field, namely to allow new private operators to come to the market beside the traditional postal operators. The “green card” of postal services regulation in 1992 was followed by postal directives from 1997 and 2002, opening the way for a unique market of post in EU. Gradual and controlled liberalization of the postal field was launched ten years ago through the Directive 97/67EC, known as “the postal directive”.

The postal directive established common regulations for developing the internal market of postal services regarding: the universal service; reserved field (monopole); tariffs related principles and universal service providers’ accounts transparency; quality standards; technical standards harmonization; creating independent national regulation authorities. In complying with this directive, member states have the obligation to guarantee all universal service users reasonable prices that would guarantee all business days and not less than five days a week, in any point of their territory, at least: taking, sorting, transporting and distributing postal deliveries up to 2 kg and postal packages up to 10 kg; registered mail related services and declared value ones; related access points to the postal network all over the territory.

Communitarian regulations thus guarantee every inhabitant of the European Union a real communication service no matter the physical and human geographic characteristics of the territory it lives on. The universal services, as defined above, which includes both national services and transfrontier services has to comply with certain quality standards, especially connected to delivery terms, as well as services regularity and reliability established by member states (national services), as well as the European Parliament and Council (communitarian transfrontier services).

When a member state considers that universal service obligations are an uneven financial duty for the service provider, it can reserve it the monopole for taking, sorting, transporting and distributing internal mail to the extent it is necessary for maintain the universal service, transfrontier post and direct mail marketing, under the
following limitations: Deliveries having the weight smaller than 50 grams (or whose presentation tariff is not 2.5 times bigger than the public tariff applicable to the mail in the first weight stage in the fastest category).

The prospective study ordered by the Commission to an international consultant reaches the conclusion that the achievement of postal services internal market in all member states in 2009 is compatible to a high superior universal service. Nonetheless, the study stipulates that the risks for maintaining the universal service imply some “association” measures by most of the member states. The studied directive project stipulates total opening of the postal market as of 1st of January 2009, maintaining at the same time common standards of universal service at the actual level for all users in all member states of the European Union.

As of 1st of January 2009, member states shall not be authorized to give exclusive or special rights (reserved field) for creating and providing postal services. There will no longer be necessary for member states to compulsorily assign one or more providers of the universal service, but they could entrust the respective service, with a time limitation, to the market forces, leaving the member states to concern about the regions or specific services that the universal service cannot be provided for by the market forces and providing some public procurement agreements, so that those services be advantageously provided from the economic point of view.

When the provision of the universal service requires external finances, member states have to choose between the following possibilities: public procurements procedure; public reimbursement through direct subventions from the state; compensation funds provided through a royalty established for the service providers and/or users; “play or pay” mechanism connecting permits to universal service obligations or financing from a compensation fund.

The analyzed directive introduces at the same time a new requirement asking member states to assess the need to guarantee all operators the transparent and undis­criminatory access to postal infrastructure elements and to the following services: postal code system, addresses database, postal boxes, mail boxes, addresses alteration related information, re-delivery service, sender return service. Access to “sorting” and “delivery” segments of the network is not provided in the aforementioned regulations.

Unlike other fields, postal services liberalization could not be made at once, but gradually and in a controlled way. The main problem in the organization of the last stage of total opening the postal market in the Union is defining the way to follow for obtaining a performance and competitive postal field that could continue to provide quality services against reasonable prices to physical persons and companies in Europe. Also, a compensation fund seems inadequate: as a matter of fact, such a system has been experimented by only one member state (namely Italy) and a failure was recorded.

The same thing applies also for financing the universal service through public subventions, which leads to the exemption of already burdened public finances, which influences again users/ taxpayers. For the last ten years, tens of jobs have been reduced in the postal field (0.7% according to the Commission data), while numerous others have been replaced for unsecure jobs or inadequate working conditions in sorting centres, delivery services or postal offices. Even if various factors, like the new
technologies or competition from other communication means, for example electronic communication, partially explains this evolution, market opening remains the main reason. Consequently, the statement according to which postal services internal markets shall allow, by increasing competition, to unblock employment potential in this field for compensating jobs decreasing by historical operators – remains to be demonstrated.

As far as the field growth potential, we can draw-up only one opinion, namely the management of the apparently irreversible decline of traditional postal services, without rethinking them according to the communication needs supposed by the Lisbon strategy and knowledge society and without analyzing effects from the view of energetic efficiency. Views about market opening are divided, according to interests. Privileged operators in the current system are afraid of crocks and are sceptical about the advantages of deregulation. French post chief – Jean – Paul Forceville claims that 77% of the clients are satisfied with the current services of the post. He drew the attention that post deregulation in Great Britain has lead to dismissals. Only Finland, Sweden, Great Britain and Estonia have totally broke the monopole on the post market. Who takes the benefit from the multicolour offer? Wealthy clients, wanting diversified services corresponding to every pocket.

What about clients isolated in a mountain chalet? For them, a balance is searched between guaranteeing minimum services and market forces liberalization. Services flexibility and modernization does not have to mean less safety. But who would give the guarantee for minimum services? Some claim that consumer’s protection regulations are enough, others insist on the post public financing.

Important steps have already been made in EU, but monopolies still exist upon the letters below 50 grams. There are success examples. In Great Britain where the field was open at 1st of January 2006, Royal Mail, holder of the record in the matter of strikes number, managed to transform, after liberalization, the gigantic losses into profits, distributed to employees, as the commissar Charlie McCreevy said.

Sweden, which opened its market in 1993, has never needed state subventions for providing quality universal service. City Mall is the main Swedish post competitor, operating only in urban areas and industrial clients. Postal offices have lost their significance, many of their activity being transferred to kiosks, common stores in gas stations. Postal stamps price is, still, the highest in Sweden, of all the member states. Privatization has developed in other countries as well, like Germany and Holland, the latter completely liberalizing only advertising mail. Delayed ones in privatization oppose to liberalization, in order to prevent operators in other countries to occupy their market. Economic patriotism thus relapses.

An independent actor, Pricewaterhouse Cooper (PWC) has drawn-up a report for the European Commission after studying the pluses and minuses of the postal market and their impact upon “universal” services (minimum compulsory) in various member states. The fact that the Directive has been proposed speaks for itself: plans have overcome minuses, liberalization is desirable.

The field of postal services is vital for commercial users and consumers that is why it is considered by the European Commission as “a general economic interest service”, which occurs after liberalization as well. In EU, universal service shall mean
the guarantee anywhere upon postal services of the same quality, at reasonable prices. In other words, a complete cover of the territory with minimum postal services. More specifically, no matter where it lives, a citizen must have access to a postal desk and a postal box.

“Universal service” is cheaper the more traffic or geographic density is lower. Cost differences occur not just between member states, but between regions as well. In Lapland, in the north of Sweden or Finland, the cost is higher than in Holland. The economic operator has only one purpose: profit. Treated as a necessary evil, general interest has to be respected. Neither compensation details have not been established yet nor those of risks taking from operators that would have to comply with their obligations. The size of universal services is the object of the third Directive of posts. If universal services obligations are excessive, then postal services beneficiaries will loose together with providers. Crossed subvention of non-profitable services by consumers would increase costs and consumers would reduce the number of deliveries. Universal services will thus be reduced.

Finally, a Romanian amendment in the European Parliament, and the Transport and Tourism Commission approved in June 2007 that postal services providers be able to diversify their activity by providing electronic services for financing “universal service”. This amendment does not include anything specific to Romania. Considered among the member states with a difficult topography or with difficulties in applying the Directive, Romania will probably be given the time to apply the 3rd Directive until 1st of January 2013, in order to identify its insurance formulas for the universal service. Left behind, our postal services will be an easy plunder for operators in other countries, in the conditions of market opening. Romanian postal services consumers will be divided: wealthy ones and giving ones shall enjoy a quality surplus, no matter the price. The poor ones could wake up without the means to send a letter. Great users, corporatists will be served better, with reasonable process in front of foreign more experienced giants.

Accepting the great risk of liberalization, we fight together with France for maintain this status-quo or do we remain neutral? A dynamic market can find its antibodies to diseases, and if we agree with the markets benefits, then I think that courageous approach, through potential competitive postal operators on a free European market would be a solution.

The European Commission called post reform as a “turnsole test” of EU ability to elaborate economic reforms and finish the sole internal market. It seems that the solution of introducing turnsole paper has not been defined yet, the British liberalism not managing to neutralize the French protectionism in order to give the favourite colour of the European Commission. We shall therefore have to, before any liberalization, establish regulations and a clear and stable framework. The reserved field shall not have to be cancelled after establishing the framework, including some really efficient and sustainable measures for financing the universal service that would be clearly identified and analyzed for every member state. These measures would have to be a previous condition for cancelling the only financing way which has proved its efficiency up to present, namely an adequate reserved field.
Consequently, postal services internal markets will allow, by increasing competition, employment potential unblocking in this field for compensating the decrease of jobs by historical operators – to be proved. Leaving from the most palpable symbol of European Union, Euro could then establish itself as the sole market of the post in EU shall occur together with the first European postal stamp. For now, we have not find something like that in the furthest plans of the European institutions. Meanwhile, the faith of the 3rd Directive is still ambiguous, as in the case of the characters in the famous film “The mailman always rings twice”.

**Conclusions.** Unlike the other fields in the network, the postal field is always characterized by a manual activity and direct contact with clients, being an important field on the matter of employment. It is estimated that in the European Union, over 5 million jobs directly depend on the postal field or are strongly connected to it. Manpower with fixed costs which is the greatest part (+/-80%) of the total cost is extremely exposed to the effects of some possible rationalization measures in liberalization and competitiveness. Postal services have a considerable social and economic significance for the economic, social and territorial cohesion and for applying the Strategy in Lisbon. They make a direct contribution to the development of social relations and fundamental rights of every person, to the creation of a contacts network and to the solidarity between people and territories, to the competitiveness of European economy and sustainable development.

We can analyze the fact that unlike other fields, postal services liberalization can be made gradually. Postal services market liberalization will draw new opportunities for players on the Courier market in Romania, capitalized through offer diversification, and further, through segmentation of clients according to their options regarding the existing services. On a medium and long term, courier companies could benefit from a growth of the number of clients and implicitly, of the turnover. Another consequence of these regulations is the growth of the competition in this market field. No doubt that the total opening of the market will encourage competition, which could generate further advantages for the final client.

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