



## **EU Parliament OKs Postal Market Liberalization By 2011**

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BRUSSELS (Dow Jones)--The European Parliament Wednesday voted to pry open the European Union's national postal markets to foreign competition by 2011, despite the European Commission's desire for markets to be open by 2009.

The measure still faces an uphill struggle, as it will now be put to national ministers for approval.

The E.U.'s postal services - which employ about 5.2 million people - are a sensitive issue. While countries such as the U.K. and Germany support the commission in its fight to open national postal markets to competition, liberalization has been staunchly resisted by others including France, Luxembourg and Belgium, which warn the move will degrade the quality of service throughout the E.U. and slash hundreds of thousands of jobs.

Ministers have no deadline to approve or reject the measure.

The E.U.'s 27 countries have already opened parcel delivery to competition outside national borders, but many maintain exclusive control on delivering letters weighing less than 50 grams. Last year the Brussels-based executive proposed taking liberalization further and ending postal monopolies in 2009.

The compromise deal approved by Parliament Wednesday delays the liberalization until 2011 and grants a further two-year delay to 2013 for most of the E.U.'s new members from the former Soviet bloc and for those with difficult transit routes, like Greece. Which countries qualify for the delay won't be decided until national governments hammer out a final deal.

The compromise also lets countries continue some financial assistance for their national postal services if it is necessary to fulfill Brussels' requirement that every home in every town in the E.U. be visited by a mail carrier at least five times a week.

Sweden, Germany, Finland, the Netherlands and the U.K. have already opened or are in the process of opening their postal services to competition. Wednesday's compromise would let those countries protect their domestic markets from outside players until all E.U. countries have followed suit, which the commission complains stalls the efforts of governments that want to see more competition in their markets and abroad.

The deal agreed Wednesday has been slammed by both those who oppose the liberalization and say postal services should remain a public service, not a commercial activity, and pr-liberalization groups.

"This will bring major inconveniences to our citizens and worsen the conditions of" postal services, Belgian Socialist Parliamentarian Alain Hutchinson said Tuesday ahead of Wednesday's vote. "Prices will spiral. This will lead to many jobs being axed."

**In a statement, Philippe Bodson, president of the Free and Fair Post Initiative which lobbies for postal customers in the E.U., said: "We are convinced that 2009 is the right time for ending postal monopolies across Europe."**

He said he hopes national ministers will ink a deal "that will be closer to the spirit and the text of the commission proposal."

Internal Market Commissioner Charlie McCreevy gave no immediate comment.

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