

The SOLVIT Centre in Belgium

SOLVIT is an informal conflict management network for the internal market. The SOLVIT Centres in 30 countries (the EU Member States, Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway) come to the assistance of citizens and companies facing cross-border problems caused by the poor application of internal market rules by a public administration. The success of SOLVIT lies in its flexibility, for this fast, efficient network provides real solutions to individual problems, sparing the need for court rulings and tribunals. The Solvit Centre in Belgium is attached to the Foreign Affairs' Directorate-General for Coordination and European Affairs.

Over the last few months, SOLVIT has been given increased media coverage by the Community institutions, which want to promote and boost the use made of it by the general public.

Under the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, the SOLVIT Centre in Belgium will be responsible for organising the 27th Workshop of the network, together with the European Commission. That meeting will be held against the broader backdrop of an entire week at the end of November 2010 dedicated to the transposition and application of Community law under the Belgian Presidency.

SOLVIT: personalised assistance in the internal market

Set up in 2002, the SOLVIT network provides fast and specific solutions to problems experienced by European citizens and companies as a result of the poor application of European legislation by national public authorities. There is a SOLVIT Centre in every Member State (as well as in Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway). Each is part of its respective national administration and undertakes to find swift, pragmatic solutions in just 10 weeks. Belgium's SOLVIT Centre is attached to the Directorate-General for European Affairs and Coordination.

The SOLVIT network is becoming more and more successful in all the Member States. In 2009, SOLVIT helped a record 1,500 citizens and companies struggling to assert their internal market rights vis-à-vis national public administrations, an increase of 54% on the previous year. The most frequent problems concerned residency rights, social security and the recognition of professional qualifications. 86% of cases were resolved in an average the turnaround time of no more than two months. Moreover, since 2007 the number of cases handled by SOLVIT has exceeded the number of official complaints and infringement proceedings recorded in connection with the internal market.

SOLVIT: one of a number of mechanisms for solving problems without legal proceedings

The European Commission has been talking about rationalising and restructuring all Community-internal market services since 2008. The Single Market Assistance Services (SMAS) action plan follows on from the Communication of 20 November 2007 on a Single Market for 21st century Europe (COM(2007) 724 final), which proposed a one-stop shop for existing online Community services answering questions from citizens and companies on the workings of the internal market. The Your Europe portal was chosen as the point of departure for accessing all assistance or information services.

One of the first accomplishments of this major restructuring was to strengthen collaboration between SOLVIT and the Citizens' Signpost Service (CSS). Since May 2009, the two networks have shared a common complaint form, which automatically redirects complainants to the CSS or SOLVIT, depending on whether they require legal advice (CSS) or personalised assistance (SOLVIT). The success of the SOLVIT/CSS duo should inspire other forms of enhanced collaboration within the internal market.

The European Parliament pays more attention to SOLVIT

2009 was also the year in which MPs and MEPs showed a keener interest in the network against the broader backdrop of efforts to revitalise the internal market. In an initial non-legislative resolution on SOLVIT adopted in March 2010, rapporteur MEP Cristian Busoi (ALDE, Romania) advocated greater media coverage for SOLVIT and stronger mechanisms for the SOLVIT network. MEPs also called on the Member States to provide more qualified staff to SOLVIT Centres and ensure more efficient cooperation between national, regional and local authorities and SOLVIT, through a broader, more intensive exchange of best practices.

SOLVIT was also mentioned in the report by Professor Mario Monti entitled A New Strategy for the Single Market and in the report by MEP Louis Grech (S&D, Malta) entitled Delivering a Single Market to Consumers and Citizens. Both reports highlighted the need to promote recourse to this instrument.

The Belgian parliament's first document on the SOLVIT Centre in Belgium has been available on the Chamber's website since January.

The SOLVIT Centre in Belgium

Belgium's SOLVIT Centre is one of the most efficient in Europe, with a fast turnaround rate (50 days) and a high success rate (90%). These results are due mainly to active collaboration by the respective administrative authorities.

Cooperation between the Belgium's SOLVIT Centre and the administrations in question is channelled via a network of Euro-coordinators, who process the information relating to daily case management as well as data on any structural problems highlighted by SOLVIT. The tightening of relations between SOLVIT and the Euro-coordinators has greatly enhanced the success of the SOLVIT Centre in Belgium and enabled it to manage such a high number of cases.

The statistics show that Belgium was involved in processing 89 cases in 2009, a 27% increase on 2008. Belgium's specific geographical location in the EU, the presence there of the main EU institutions, the high proportion of both border workers and nationals from other Member States are just some of the major factors that explain the disproportionately large number of cases filed with Belgium's SOLVIT Centre, compared with its size and the Community average.

Interaction between the transposition and application of Community law

There is a close link between the transposition and application of Community law. The SOLVIT network also serves as a potential warning system, highlighting structural problems to do with the poor transposition or interpretation of legislation. It collaborates closely with the transposition unit, again via the network of Euro-coordinators.

SOLVIT events during the Belgian Presidency

During the Belgian Presidency, Belgium's SOLVIT Centre and the European Commission will be organising the 27th SOLVIT Workshop, bringing together all the network's representatives. This Belgian workshop will be held as part of an entire week dedicated to the transposition and application of Community law under the Belgian Presidency. The FPS Foreign Affairs Directorate-General for Legal Affairs will open the week with a conference on 22 and 23 November on the transposition of EU directives into national legislation. The SOLVIT Centre will follow this up on 24 and 25 November with a workshop on best practices in the application and execution of Community law.

Calendar of events

22-23 November 2010

Conference on the transposition and application of Community legislation under national law (DGJ/FPS Foreign Affairs)

24-25 November 2010

27th SOLVIT workshop on the application of Community legislation (DGE/FPS Foreign Affairs)