

Euro Info Centre Network

Annual Report 2004

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2004 Annual Report

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Introduction

Established in 1987, the Euro Info Centre (EIC) network has grown from 39 centres to 282. Just as their number has increased, so has their range of services. Initially the role of the EICs was to provide information on the European Community to small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

Soon after their inception, the EICs also began to provide assistance, advice and value-added services to companies in a number of ways. They provide support for SMEs in all phases of their development and whatever their level of familiarity with Europe. Through the Interactive Policy Making (IPM) initiative, they also play a feedback role by collecting reactions to EU regulations in the business community. This allows the European Commission to improve and refine its actions in line with the demands of business.

An external evaluation of the Multiannual Programme for Enterprise and Entrepreneurship and in particular for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) (2001-2005) was carried out in 2004. The results of this evaluation highlighted the added value of the EIC network even though its potential may not yet have been fully exploited.

In 2004, major efforts have been made to help SMEs explore new business opportunities and develop their international activities. The EICs have significantly reinforced their services in the field of business cooperation and partner search assistance. Moreover, they spearheaded a campaign to make companies more aware of the challenges of enlargement and to help them to take advantage of the new business opportunities which will result from this.

The aim of this Annual Report is to provide a brief account of the main activities of the Euro Info Centre network during 2004. It also details the improvements in the skill level of the EICs during this period.

A network of skills under constant development

1

A widespread network close to businesses

By the end of 2004, the Euro Info Centre network was active in **44 countries and approximately 280 towns**. The network consisted of:

- **269** Euro Info Centres spread throughout the 25 EU countries, the EEA and the candidate countries.
- **13** Euro Info 'Correspondence' Centres located in Chile, Croatia, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Switzerland, Kosovo, Lebanon, Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro, Syria, Tunisia.
- **26** Associate Members: European or national SME representative organisations which, owing to their specific expertise, enable EICs to expand the scope of their services.
- **340** relay centres, significantly extending the geographical coverage of the network.

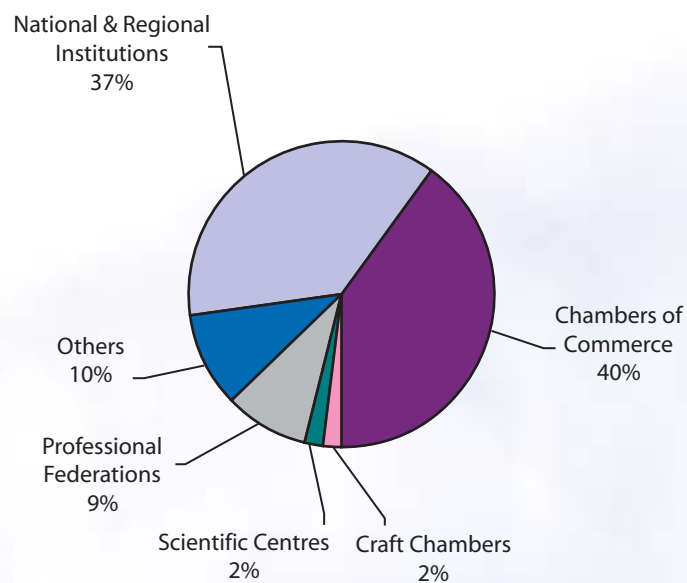
Euro Info Centres and Euro Info Correspondence Centres are present in the following countries :

Austria Belgium Bosnia Herzegovina Bulgaria Chile Croatia Cyprus Czech Republic Denmark Egypt Estonia Finland France FYROM Germany Greece Hungary Iceland Ireland Israel Italy Jordan		Kosovo Latvia Lebanon Lithuania Luxembourg Malta Montenegro Netherlands Norway Poland Portugal Romania Spain Sweden Switzerland Syria Serbia Slovakia Slovenia Turkey Tunisia United Kingdom
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Benefiting from the support of professional partners

Presence at the local level is one of the key strengths of the network. Euro Info Centres are hosted by local organisations, either public or private, which have a thorough knowledge of the local economic environment. Through their financial and operational support, these Host Structures play a key role in the effective operation of the network. Chambers of Commerce are the most represented bodies:

Types of host structures



Sharing knowledge to increase expertise

In 2004, **70 members** of the EIC network, possessing a significant expertise in a particular area, met regularly within working groups dedicated to specific themes. They developed knowledge and skills which they then disseminated to the other EICs, thus enabling them to raise the quality of service provided to their clients.

In 2004, EIC Working Groups were active in the following fields:

- Environment - Sustainable development
- Market access
- Information Society and E-Business
- Conformity assessment
- EU Financing
- Public procurement
- Research and development
- EIC business co-operation and partner search
- EIC management and organisation
- EIC co-operation with other networks

Throughout the year, they contributed to the organisation of training sessions, as well as to the development of appropriate methodologies and tools for the delivery of value-added services to business. In total, **60 products**, ranging from methodological guides to background information, fact-sheets and models for best practice, were developed and/or updated in 2003-2004.

Examples of products

Guide - A simple way to set up Environmental Management Systems

Developed by the 'Environment' and 'Conformity Assessment' working groups, this guide sets out the major points of coincidence and the most important differences between the Quality Management System (ISO9000) and the Environmental Quality Management System (ISO14000 and subsequently EMAS II). Its aim is to help companies which have adopted a Quality Management System, to see more clearly which requirements they still need to meet in order to obtain the Environmental Management System certification.

Country Profiles

Fact sheets on the markets of the 10 new Member States and the three candidate countries were developed by the 'Market Access' working group. Information provided includes, inter alia, information on how to set up a company, applicable laws and regulations, local market conditions, inward investment incentives and the local banking and taxation systems.

Raising the skill level of the EICs

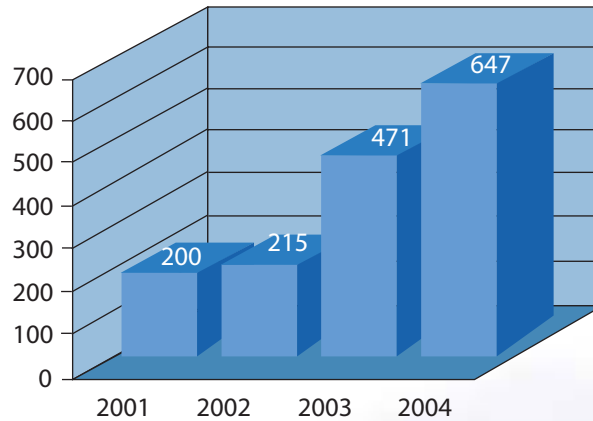
All in all, there are more than **1,600 people** in the network. In order to keep their skills up to date, and indeed to improve and expand them, they participate in regular training activities provided by Directorate General Enterprise and Industry.

The year 2004 was marked by two trends with regard to training activities:

- **A 37% increase in the organisation and attendance** of training sessions, with a total of **647 participations**;
- **A diversification of the types of training on offer** in order to respond to changing conditions and needs of participants. Six new sessions (e-information, business co-operation, IPM, waste management, customer care and intellectual property rights) were introduced.

These demonstrate the interest that EIC staff show in developing and expanding their skills in order to constantly improve the services offered to businesses.

Number of participants per year



Stimulating the network effect

The network effect is one of the key strengths of the EIC network. EICs are in daily contact with each other and with the Commission. To facilitate communication, the network makes full use of common, centrally supported electronic tools. In addition, numerous events, such as meetings, training sessions and the annual conference, are organised in order to reinforce the links between the network members. SMEs seeking assistance regarding another part of the EU can go via their local EIC who has access to information from across the Union through the EIC's extensive network.

2004 Annual Meeting: Linking businesses to Europe

The 14th Euro Info Centre (EIC) Conference, which took place in Bucharest from 20 to 22 October 2004, focused on the relationship between the EU and SMEs and the role of the Euro Info Centres in linking businesses to Europe.



Nearly 600 participants attended this conference, which, in the context of the future enlargement of the EU, the Commission chose to hold in Romania. The conference offered the network an opportunity to define common goals and develop strategies and tools that will help them supply European companies with ever more efficient services, tailored to their individual needs. External experts in business strategy, business co-operation and communication also shared their know-how, with the aim of increasing the capacity of the network to respond effectively to the needs of SMEs. Moreover, an open forum was in operation throughout the Conference, providing participants with space to promote ideas and products, as well as to exchange knowledge and experience.

Quality services for business

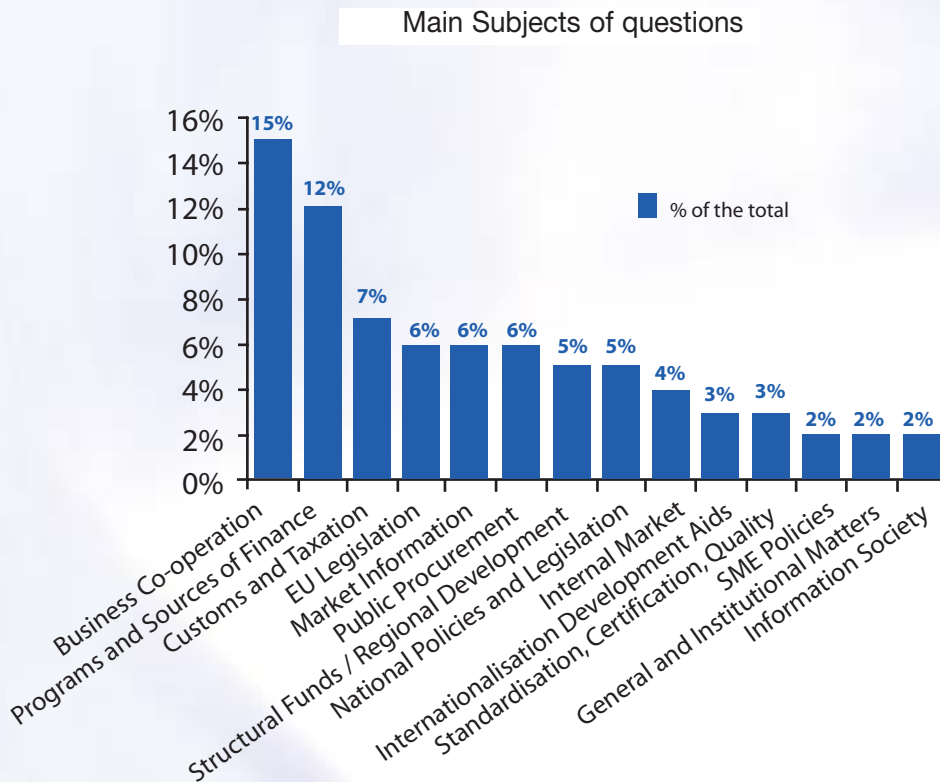
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Information requests from companies

A key service of the EICs is to answer questions posed by businesses on EU related matters and to help increase their understanding of the issues involved. In 2004, the EICs replied to more than **310,000 requests** for information, advice and assistance. On average, each EIC dealt with over 95 requests per month.

Around 30 % of the questions were complex ones, requiring more in depth-research. Business co-operation, the EU support programmes and sources of funding remain the two main subjects of information requests.

The following chart shows the most common subjects dealt with in the questions posed by SMEs.



Examples of questions

- o Can I use the “made in EU” label on my products?
- o What regulations and duties are applicable to our products if we import them from Africa to Europe?
- o Which safety standards must my machinery meet?
- o How can I set up a European Association?
- o Which chemical products may I not use in my products?
- o I would like to change my registered office to another EU Member State. Do I have to respect a specific procedure?

Value-added services

EICs have continued to develop specific services to help SMEs access EU information more easily through which they also provided more and more companies with individual assistance.

Info Watch Services

In 2004, **700 'info-watch services'** were offered by EICs to their clients. By subscribing to this specific service, businesses have the possibility of requesting all relevant European information on a specific subject or sector: new legislation, new financing, new programmes, etc... in either paper or electronic format.

Almost 600 clients subscribed to the eight 'info-watch services' of the Romanian EIC of Constanta. This EIC selects, translates and disseminates the relevant information to eight groups of businesses in accordance with their main centres of interest: environment, R&D, financing, business opportunities, culture, education, social policy and enlargement.

Tender Alert Services

Almost 270,000 clients benefited from the Tender Alert Service offered by certain EICs. Using specialist software, the EICs can run customised searches which enable them to identify any tender opportunities relevant to the requirements of their clients. Tailored to the specific needs of the company, these alerts ensure that businesses do not miss out on public contract opportunities due to a lack of information or missed deadlines.

Under the Interreg IIIB Alpine Space programme, six Euro Info Centres, in France (Grenoble and Strasbourg), Italy (Torino), Germany (München and Lahr) and Switzerland (Zurich), developed a scheme to facilitate cross-border exchanges in the field of public procurement. They deployed an electronic dissemination system to let companies know about public procurement opportunities, below EU thresholds, issued in the participating regions and covering their fields of activity.

In support of this Tender Alert Service, they also edited a guide featuring the various national public procurement laws in the participating countries and organised a number of public-procurement workshops.

Events organised in response to business needs

The expertise of the network is also made available to European companies through seminars, workshops, conferences, training sessions and trade fairs. More than **4700 events** were organised by EICs all over Europe. This represents an average of 19 events for every working day.

Challenges and opportunities for innovative companies in EU border regions

The initiative LOOK-EAST NET, lead by the EIC Gorizia, in cooperation with nine other EICs, aimed at promoting the competitiveness of SMEs in three EU border regions - Friuli-Venezia Giulia in Italy, Eastern Macedonia in Greece and Carinthia in Austria - in order to develop their trade and industrial relations with their counterparts in the new Member States. Three partnership events in Friuli-Venezia Giulia (Italy), Eastern Macedonia (Greece) and Carinthia (Austria) benefited over 250 enterprises.

Foreign investment possibilities

The Lithuanian EIC of Kaunas, in cooperation with the Embassy of the Republic of Hungary, organised an international conference on "Foreign investment possibilities: Hungary-Lithuania, 2004". During this conference, the participants obtained practical information on doing business in Lithuania and on Hungarian investment policy and business development projects. Following the conference, a number of bilateral meetings took place between Lithuanian and Hungarian companies.

A successful campaign: EICs increase SME awareness of the challenges of enlargement

A precursory network

During the 1st semester 2004, the EIC network carried on with a campaign initiated in 2003, which aimed at encouraging SMEs from EU Members States, Norway, Iceland and the new Members States to start preparing for enlargement well in advance. It was crucial to make companies aware of the challenges offered by enlargement, as well as the possible consequences for business.

200 Euro Info Centres from 26 countries organised around 400 concrete and value-added actions and services: awareness-raising events, tailor-made services on the topic of enlargement, business clubs and national websites.

Specifically targeted to business needs, these actions were of direct benefit to around 100 000 companies² with a European vocation and interested in the new market opportunities offered by enlargement.

Practical, with a focus on learning, these actions helped businesses to:

- be informed about the major implications of enlargement;
- be aware of the risks and opportunities of enlargement and integrate them into their business strategy;

² Estimated figure

- increase their knowledge of the main characteristics of the economies of the EU and of the accession countries;
- familiarise them with the best ways to conduct business in these countries;
- benefit from the new business opportunities.

EICs as reference points on enlargement

In response to increasing demands from companies, the EICs continued to provide support to companies wishing to take advantage of enlargement beyond the end of the campaign. Because of the wide coverage of the network, and the considerable experience gained in this area, the EICs became one of the natural contact points for businesses interested in enlargement issues.

The Polish EIC in Warsaw set up an innovative 'Enlargement' service consisting of 20 interactive internet 'chat rooms' where Polish companies could communicate with legal experts on the harmonisation of Polish law with EU law.

Some Swedish, Estonian and Polish EICs opened a "Virtual Business Office". Through this on-line service, the EICs could identify potential business partners, in these three countries, for their clients and put them in contact with each other.

EICs on the Internet

Today, the EIC network has a strong presence on the Internet through over **300 web-sites**. These sites are either integrated into the Host Structures' sites or are set up and managed independently. Businesses visiting these sites have access to all relevant information concerning European affairs, the services offered by the EICs and the events organised by them.

In addition to this, 25 national internet portals also promote the EICs' activities.

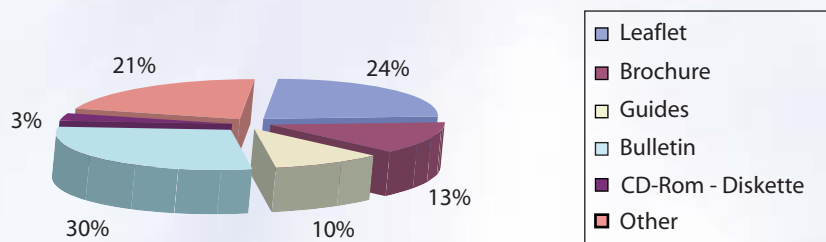
At the 2004 EIC Annual Conference in Bucharest, the Irish EIC Network was presented with the award for "EIC National Website of the Year". The Irish national website (<http://www.eic.ie/>) provides extensive information on European public tenders, legislation, funding, business cooperation, news, guides and much more.



Publications

The EICs provide a wide range of information documents as a means of maintaining their clients' awareness of EU developments. In 2004, more than **5,800,000 copies** of these documents were distributed to clients.

Types of documents



Areas of expertise

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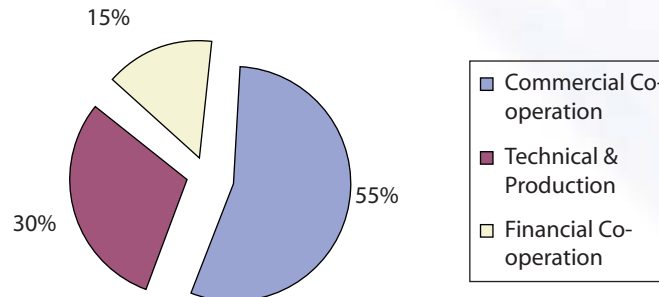
Business Co-operation - Helping businesses to find the right partners

The interest of companies in the area of business cooperation is constantly increasing. In 2004, EICs assisted over 140,000 businesses with business co-operation projects. Furthermore, over 1,500 events were dedicated to this specific theme.

In order to help its members reinforce their services to enterprises in the field of business co-operation and 'matchmaking', the EIC network has developed a variety of common products - such as a guide to international business co-operation or a calendar of the sector-specific international trade fairs most attended by EICs and their hosts.

Besides, a specific **Business Cooperation Database**, which offers a two-way partner search service, was launched in April 2004. This tool is intended to become the reference for business cooperation between enterprises in Europe. Businesses are registered in this database, which then selects the partner they are looking for according to their company profile and the type of co-operation sought. By December 2004, more than **3,000 profiles of businesses** had been encoded in this database.

Profiles by type of cooperation, 2004



In addition to the Business Partner Search Service, EICs also offer companies:

- A company-driven programme of Business to Business events:
Businesses are given the opportunity to take part in 'matchmaking' events, events that bring together businesses searching for partners, within the context of sectoral trade fairs. These events enable companies to meet face to face and thus make it easier to find the partner they are looking for. They also encourage them to enlarge the scope of their partner search by considering other types of partnerships.
- A coaching programme:
The EICs also coach SMEs through the process of internationalisation. They notably offer them preparatory training support before matchmaking events and ensure a regular and professional follow up.

The Pan-European Business Co-operation Schemes

The overall objective of the "Pan-European Business Co-operation Scheme Projects", supported by the Enlargement Directorate General in cooperation with the Enterprise and Industry Directorate General, is to encourage an environment favourable to business co-operation and inter-enterprise relations in a wider Europe. Five of the six projects selected by the European Commission within this framework are carried out by an EIC led consortia and involve around 70 Euro Info Centres.

These actions consist in the organisation and implementation of business co-operation and matchmaking events at international trade fairs, as well as through accompanying activities for businesses in a number of economic sectors, such as the metal sector, wood, machinery and tools, electrotechnics, car components, ITT, etc.

B2fair - Companies in the European metal sector benefit from 'matchmaking' events at international trade fairs.

In cooperation with 31 partners from 20 countries, as well as the trade fair companies, Euro Info Centre Stuttgart has set up B2fair (Business to Fair) - the basis for successful cooperation contacts. B2fair combines international fairs with cooperation exchanges, allowing companies to profit from both ways of exploring new markets. The project plans to bring together 1,000 SMEs within the context of five leading international trade fairs in the metal sector, and to organize 10,000 business meetings before the end of 2005. In 2004, the launch of the B2fair project involved over 250 companies who benefited from co-operation exchanges at the AMB, the leading fair for the metal industry in Stuttgart, and the MIDEST, the international industrial sub-contracting exhibition in Paris.

b2europe - better access to a wider range of business services



In order to further improve the access of businesses to information and advisory services, the Commission continued with the implementation of the b2europe initiative, which aims to create an alliance of EU business support networks (EICs, IRCs, BICs³,...). With b2europe, networks will provide better services, quicker and more efficiently to the client. As a result, businesses will be able to apply to any of these networks and will receive a quality service from the network the most adequate to respond to their particular request and/or needs.

b2europe took a big step forward in 2004. Common tools, produced with the assistance of b2europe members, will facilitate their mutual communication with the overall aim of improving their support to European SMEs at local level. These tools include a charter, a code of ethics and a signposting tool to assist the redirection of a client from one network to another.

Local Cooperation - a successful precursor of b2europe

In order to put the b2europe initiative into practice, the Commission is supporting the setting-up of local co-operation projects in collaboration with the relevant business support organisations at local level. The actors involved range from Commission networks (IRCs, BICs, etc.) to regional and local institutions.

In 2004, 56 EICs - that is to say 20% of the EIC network - initiated **126 local cooperation projects**, which will still be running in 2005. Joint websites providing information on business support services in the region, regional community network guides/brochures and joint events have been organised to give businesses easier access to the most relevant support services.

³ IRC: Innovation Relay Centre
BIC: Business Innovation Centre

An alliance of business support services to help SMEs win tenders

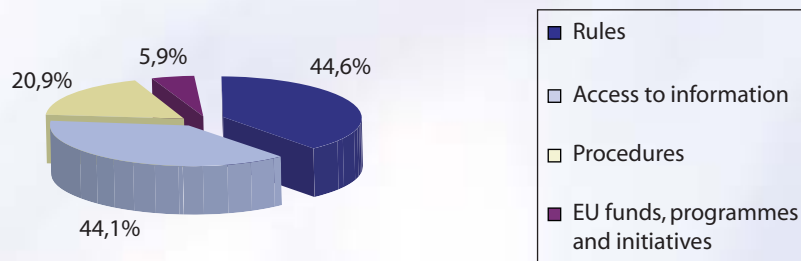
The EIC of Southampton brought together a substantial number of business support organisations, within the south east of England region, in order to assist businesses more effectively in the field of public procurement. In cooperation with 10 partners (chambers of commerce, IRC, development agency, etc), the EIC developed an e-learning website on public procurement. This site helps companies to build groups in order to collaborate and win tenders.

Interactive Policy Making initiative: Channelling the voice of business to the European Commission

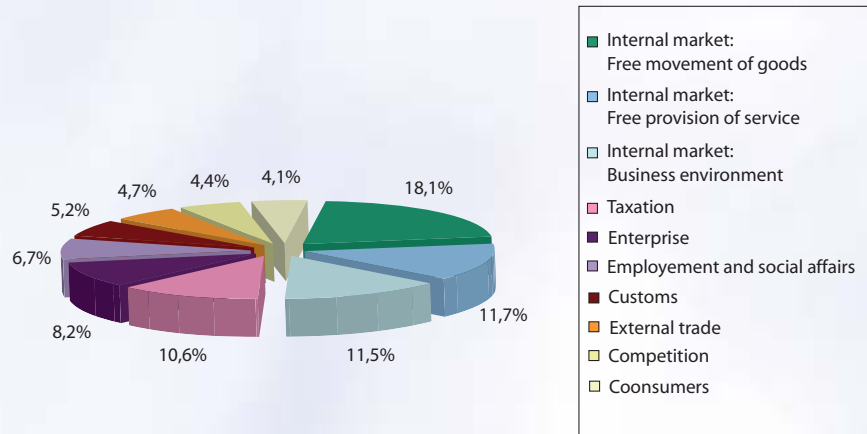


The Interactive Policy Making Initiative (IPM), a European Commission project, aims to use the Internet for the collection and analysis of marketplace reactions to EU regulations as a means of supporting the European Union policy-making process. The EIC network is established as a privileged intermediary in the development of this feedback and consultation process ever since its original launch in 2000. In 2004, **200 Euro Info Centres** were official intermediaries in recording the issues raised by businesses. They collect spontaneous information from businesses concerning their daily problems relating to different EU policies and report them to the European Commission via the Online Feedback database. In 2004, they filled in more than **5,500 cases** drawing attention to obstacles to the functioning of the Internal Market.

In the registered cases, the nature of the difficulties faced by businesses were mainly linked to the **following types of problems**:



And were related to the **following EU policies:**



The valuable knowledge acquired from the IPM⁴ feedback mechanism is intended to help the European policy-maker to identify where problems are, to assess their impact, to monitor the implementation of the rules and to shape new policies or to improve the existing ones. Examples of such activities include work in the area of public procurement, recognition of diplomas, legislation related to the new approach etc.

Within the framework of their mission, and in respect of confidentiality rules, Euro Info Centres participate actively in the IPM⁴ feedback initiative and facilitate the use of its results at national and local level. For instance, they transmit reports to regional or national authorities in charge of policy-making, and follow-up on specific difficulties encountered by a particular sector. They also forward information to observatories in specific policy areas.

⁴ IPM: Interactive Policy Making Initiative

Further information

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<http://eic.cec.eu.int>

