



**TO ASSOCIATE OR NOT TO ASSOCIATE**

Association is a very European notion. Centuries back the inhabitants of the Old Continent gathered together to protect their common interests and to protect themselves against third parties. A look at the Middle Ages, for example, gives us the perfect example of the trades guilds.

The 20th century saw the height of associationism, with the maximum expression of trade unions and business confederations. The gaming sector joined this tendency in mid-century.

Nowadays we can clearly state that there are solid basis for regulators, operators and manufacturers to discuss opinions, find common ground and, at times, to agree with each other.

As regards regulators, each European country has inter-governmental commissions to analyse the situation of gaming in their respective countries. On the other hand, however, these commissions operate on the basis of outmoded criteria, as in the case of Italy, Germany and Spain. In most cases, they consist of low-level civil servants with no understanding of the matter. Countries such as the UK, Sweden and Finland have more agile and operative commissions, although these do not always hit the right note as regards the legal developments which affect gaming. In 1989, European politicians took a giant step forwards with the creation of the Gaming Regulators European Forum, (GREF), which gathered gaming regulators in most European countries to discuss their respective national policies and to exchange information, although they did not have to enter into binding agreements. The GREF moved slowly, as in matters such as common legislation, the harmonisation of authorisation or Internet gaming, things remain the same as when the Forum was founded, over 15 years ago. In any case, at least they get together and talk. The business sector has seen greater efficiency and development of the concept of association, although the

proliferation of associations in the slot sector may be seen as excessive and, therefore, counterproductive, especially in the case of Spain. As regards Casinos, an excellent example is to be found in the British Casino Association which was also the force behind the foundation of the European Casino Forum, now the European Casino Association, (ECA), grouping over 800 Casinos from 19 countries and employing over 70,000 persons. The ECA holds periodic meetings and, although members may disagree in certain matters, finds common ground in many areas. Once again, the private sector has proven itself to be ahead of their respective national governments.

Even the European Union maintains the idea that each government should impose its own national rules. To date, the EU hasn't been able to focus the matter of gaming in Europe as a whole. However, in 2004 it took a leap forwards, in entrusting the Swiss Institute of Comparative Law with a study on gaming in Europe, which should be ready for late 2006.

From a journalistic point of view, it is very clear that business association in this sector can operate on an international level, as shown by the European Casino Association or the European Gaming and Amusement Federation, better known as Euromat, while, at national level, most associations dance to a slower tune. This could be explained by the fact that, while international associations are practically taking their first steps, their baby steps, national agencies are trying to climb harder peaks. While we would have to give national associations a big duck egg, the GREF deserves at least a B.

As regards gaming unions, to be brutally honest we would have to say that they have very little power and the minimum number of members. Without a doubt, we must all – businesses, regulators and employees – work together to harmonise the laws that deal with gaming matters in the EU as a whole, to seek EU authorisation of all products. This really important step must be taken together. If we could do this, it would be proof that association had achieved its targets and reached a common finishing line.

