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CULTURE: Florence has shown the way

Europe can meet the challenge - but time is running out.

"The Florence Conference is not the point of arrival but rather the starting point for a joint effort, which should be translated into concrete action". In his closing address to the Conference on cultural challenges to Europe, which ended on March 28, the European Commissioner, Carlo Ripa di Meana, drew up a list of the organizations, research centres and participants that had ensured its success, in order to underline the diversity of the contributions and the richness of the themes which had been debated at Florence.

The material assembled during the four days was extensive and valuable and will be subjected later, along with the preparatory studies, to a detailed examination, in collaboration with the European University Institute, with a view to translating the ideas and suggestions expressed during the Conference into a series of proposals to be submitted to the European Commission. Europe must meet the technological challenge but it must respond by means of a technological culture and not limit itself to using the media.

The Conference was opened on March 25 with speeches by the Mayor of Florence, Massimo Bogiankino, Mr Werner Maihofer of the European University Institute and the European Commissioner, Carlo Ripa di Meana. The orators showed their hand from the very start. The fact that on the eve of the third millenium Europe was lagging behind, economically and technologically, could give rise to fears of an irreversible decline in the culture and spiritual influence of the Old World. It was therefore up to the European Community which, despite everything, represents the most advanced expression of this intercultural society which for 2,500 years has been called Europe, to become the "laboratory" in which our future is taking shape. We must prepare ourselves to meet the challenge posed by other global powers.

The next day the European Commission President, Jacques Delors, took up these themes in his address. He expanded on them even while insisting on the dangers and risks, but also the opportunities, facing Europe, if only it knows how to seize them.

EDUCATION: From European schools to the Europe of schoolchildren

A European Parliamentary report calls for European schools that are more open and less isolated.

There are primary and secondary schools which are European: the teaching is as much in Danish and Greek as it is in French and English. There are nine such schools, located in six of the 12 European Community countries\*, and they are meant for the children of officials working in the Community institutions.

The European Parliament has long been pressing for these schools to be opened up to other children. In a recent report, adopted almost unanimously by the Parliamentary Committee on Youth and Education, the Euro-MP Gabriele Peus asked that the European schools be less cut-off from the outside world.

Some 12,700 pupils were enrolled in the nine European schools on 1 January 1986. On average, two-thirds of them are the children of Community officials, and therefore pay no fees. Others must pay a special registration fee - and the number of places available for them is limited, of course.

In practice, nearly all these "other children" come from well-to-do homes. However, the majority of the children of Community officials attend schools other than the nine European schools. As many as 60% of them did so in 1983, as against 52% some 10 years earlier.

In her report Mrs Peus pointed out that the European schools, the only ones of their kind in the world, represent "an irreplaceable laboratory for the creation of a European schooling system". The fact is these schools offer the same curricula in several languages to children of different nationalities, even while preparing them for a certificate, the "European Baccalaureat", valid in principle in all Community countries.

The European Parliament's Education Committee wants the European schools to be made accessible to a much larger number of children of European "immigrants". According to the Committee, the schools should be especially welcoming for "immigrant" children who must complete their education in their country of origin.

The Euro-MP Rolf Linkohr would like to go even further. He has proposed that new European schools be opened in localities with a large European "immigrant" population, even in the absence of Community institutions.

\* Belgium, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and the U.K.

POST-CHERNOBYL: Forewarned is forearmed

The European Commission recommends a rapid information system for the EC.

Community-wide, rapid, effective, obligatory and covering every aspect of nuclear safety: such is the information system that the European Commission has just proposed to the European Community's 12 member states, in order to remedy the shortcomings of the existing Community legislation.

The absence of reliable rules was brought home to the Community in dramatic manner almost a year ago, after the nuclear accident at Chernobyl. The information system now proposed would be triggered off in the event either of a nuclear accident, even if outside the Community's own frontiers, or if abnormally high levels of radioactivity were recorded in a member state.

If adopted, the system would oblige the member state concerned to send at once, to both the European Commission and all the other member states, all available information on the accident or the release of radioactivity. The information to be supplied would include the level of radioactivity recorded in foodstuffs and drinking water as well as details of the measures taken to protect the population and keep it informed.

The Commission's proposals go a good deal further than not only the existing Community regulations but also the International Atomic Energy Agency's Convention - which has yet to come into force. The Commission has also sent the EC Council of Ministers a report which sets out the measures likely to improve the safety of nuclear installations without modifying the regulations currently in force.

HEALTH: Wanted: a reliable thermal patch for frozen foods

The European Commission is sceptical about existing methods for detecting if a thaw has set in.

Foodstuffs which have been frozen twice over, the second time after having thawed out, are a serious health hazard. But how can the consumer spot such items on supermarket shelves?

Thermal patches, which are embedded in the packing and change colour during thawing, have been recommended by European consumer associations, according to a Belgian Euro-MP. But the European Commission is sceptical: it claims thermal patches measure only the ambient temperature.

It therefore sees no reason to make their use mandatory.

NATURAL GAS: The Soviet Union is the Community's main foreign supplier

The EC produced less and imported more of it in 1986.

Natural gas production in the 12-nation European Community\* declined by 2%, while consumption rose by 1.2% last year. Imports went up by 8%, mainly from the Soviet Union, which is now the Community's main supplier, according to Eurostat, the EC's statistical office.

Production fell by 30% in Ireland, 21% in France and nearly 8% in the Netherlands, the Community's main producer. As a result, supplies of Dutch gas to other Community countries fell by 16%, obliging several of them, and especially France and Germany, to import more from outside the Community.

Imports from third countries rose by over 8%. Every country recorded an increase with the exception of the Netherlands and Britain, the two largest producers. These imports today account for over one-third of the total consumption of the 12-nation Community, as against 21% in 1979. Imports represent more than 87% of Spanish consumption, 69% of French and 52% of Belgian.

The Soviet Union supplied 14% of the Community's gas consumption and some 40% of its imports from all third countries in 1986. It has replaced Norway as the EC's main foreign supplier. Imports from the Soviet Union showed a marked rise in France (31%), Italy (27%) and Germany (18%).

Norway supplied less than 34% of the Community's imports last year, as compared to 36% in 1985 and over 44% in 1979. Algeria remains the third largest supplier with 26%; this is less than in 1985 but well above the 9% recorded in 1979. Libya, however, accounted for just over 1% of the Community's imports last year, as against nearly 7% in 1979.

As for the sectoral consumption of natural gas, it fell sharply in the power sector, rose slightly in the industrial and was more or less stable in the domestic sector. The drop in demand was due to a switch to other fuels in the U.K. and Ireland and to an increase in nuclear power in France and Belgium.

\* There is no production or consumption of natural gas in Portugal.

BUSINESS: For September, 28 centres for European Business Information

The European Commission launches an operation to help SMEs.

From September, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs in Community jargon) will have at their disposal centres able to provide them information on Community regulations, including those in preparation, and on the various forms of Community aid available to them.

There will be 28 such centres, officially known as European Business Information Centres, in the Community. They will be run by chambers of commerce, professional bodies, regional development centres and other organizations experienced in dealing with SMEs.

In the European Community's Official Journal for March 17 (S 5363), the European Commission has invited interested bodies to submit their applications. Those to be entrusted with the task of organizing these information centres will be selected in May, and the centre staff will receive special training in Brussels during June and July.

The information centres will keep SMEs informed of all current aspects of the single internal market and of the rules governing trade between member states. They will also be able to answer all questions regarding the progressive realization of the 12-nation common market by the target date of 1992.

In addition, the new centres will keep SMEs posted in the various kinds of financial aid available to them from the Community. These include funds for research and to perfect new processes; regional aid; help with training; loans, etc. The information centres will also tell SMEs of the possibilities open to them under the Community's foreign trade policies.

But the centres will also have the task of keeping the European Commission informed of the needs of SMEs, their reactions and their suggestions, so that it can take them into account before taking the initiative in fields of interest to them. The SMEs account for some 80% of the total number of firms in the Community and play a key role in job creation and innovation, according to the European Commission.

Until the end of 1988 the information centres will represent a pilot scheme, and each will receive ECU 100,000\* from the Commission. At the end of this period the Commission will decide whether or not to continue them.

\* 1 ECU = UK£ 0.71 or IR£ 0.78.

ENVIRONMENT: A blue flag for clean beaches and ports

Operation "Blue Flag" is launched.

All seaside resorts with clean beaches and ports for pleasure boats in the 12-nation European Community will be able to fly the flag this summer, a special blue flag. Operation "Blue Flag" is an initiative of the Foundation of Environmental Education in Europe (FEEE), and is aimed at rewarding those resorts which meet certain "environmental" criteria. It is backed by the European Commission and is being run in the context of the European Year of the Environment (EYE).

The Operation was launched in Brussels on March 30 with the signature of the Blue Charter of Europe for beaches and the Blue Ports of Europe Charter. Its aim is to improve environmental protection of beaches and ports by encouraging local and regional authorities to make the necessary investments.

A questionnaire has been mailed to all European seaside authorities with beaches and/or ports. Those that meet the criteria set out in Community regulations, especially those regarding the quality of bathing water contained in the 1976 Directive, as well as the criteria set out in the Charters, will have the right to fly the Blue Flag. It will be handed over in mid-June for the beaches and in mid-August for ports.

COAL/STEEL: ECU 1.3m. to improve working conditions

The European Commission is helping fund eight research projects.

Both working conditions and safety in the coal and steel industries should improve as a result of eight new research projects launched by European companies with the financial backing of the European Commission. The ECU 1.3m.\* which the Commission is devoting to these projects is part of the ECU 15m. earmarked for the fifth research programme into safety in the coal and steel industries.

One of the projects, undertaken by the Dogson Institute, seeks to perfect special electrical breathing apparatus for coal miners. Another project, which the Dutch firm Scholtens/Hoogovens is working on, is for a remote-controlled device for cleaning out gas pipelines in steel mills. A German mining company, Nitsche Eschweiler, is working on protective cabins for miners exposed to a great deal of noise and dust.

The projects will last from one to three years. The Commission is meeting 60% of the costs in most cases.

\* 1 ECU = UK£ 0.71 or IR£ 0.78.

DATABASES: The EC's PTTs - untouched by the European spirit

The cost of interrogating a database: PTT rates in the EC.

The electronic information market is not much of a common market as yet. It always costs more - and often much more - to interrogate a database in another European Community member state than in one's own country. What is more, VAT charges can add anywhere up to 22% to the bill, as can be seen from the Table below, prepared by the European Commission's experts on the information market.

To interrogate a database it is necessary to establish a telecommunications link via your PTT. Community PTTs generally divide the world into four different zones for pricing purposes: national, European, North American and the Rest of the World.

The cost of what can be regarded as a typical 20-minute search (at 1200 baud and using 620 segments of digital information) varies from ECU 0.9\* in Ireland to ECU 4.85 in Germany. The European rates are always higher than national rates - by as little as 18% in Germany but as much as 2½ times in Denmark.

As for VAT, the rate is a harmless 0% in Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands and Portugal but as much as 22% in Denmark.

PTT and VAT rates on 1 April 1987 (in ECU)

<u>Country</u>	<u>National</u>	<u>European</u>	<u>European/ national</u>	<u>VAT</u>
Belgium	1.60	3.17	199%	19%
Denmark	1.50	3.98	265%	22%
France	1.91	4.64	242%	18.6%
Germany	4.85	5.75	118%	0%
Greece	not available	6.57	-	12%
Ireland	0.90	2.25	250%	0%
Italy	1.85	4.64	251%	18%
Luxembourg	1.25	2.62	210%	10%
Netherlands	2.03	3.52	173%	0%
Portugal	1.16	3.03	261%	0%
Spain	2.49	4.24	170%	12%
United Kingdom	1.90	4.02	190%	15%

\* 1 ECU = UK£ 0.71 or IR£ 0.78.



AID: ECU 1,600m. for North Africa and the Middle East

The EC finally approves an aid package for eight Mediterranean countries.

The eight countries of the southern and eastern Mediterranean that are linked to the 12-nation European Community by cooperation agreements are to receive from it more than ECU 1,600m.\* in all in the form of grants and loans for the period 1987 to 1991. After several fruitless meetings the EC Council of Ministers finally reached agreement at its meeting on March 30 and 31.

The funds which the Community is providing its eight Mediterranean partners includes ECU 615m. in grants and just over ECU 1,000m. in loans from the European Investment Bank, the EC's own bank.

The beneficiary countries are the three Maghreb countries on the one hand - Morocco (ECU 324m.), Algeria (ECU 239m.) and Tunisia (ECU 224m.) - and, on the other, the four Mashreq countries - Egypt (ECU 449m.), Jordan (ECU 100m.), Lebanon (ECU 73m.) and Syria (ECU 147m.). The eighth country, Israel, is to receive ECU 63m.

The sum earmarked for Syria is largely theoretical for the moment. Community aid to Syria was blocked following Britain's decision to break off diplomatic relations with Amman, after a terrorist plot, in which Syrian diplomats were implicated, was foiled at Heathrow Airport.

The details of the Community's aid package must now be negotiated by the Commission with each of the beneficiary countries. The results will be set out in a fresh series - the third, in fact - of financial protocols. The first series covered the period 1977 to 1981, the second 1982 to 1986.

The sum now approved by the EC Council of Ministers represents a 60% increase over the earlier protocols, but it is below that sought by the European Commission. The latter had asked for a total of ECU 1,734m., of which ECU 709m. would have been in the form of grants.

With the new aid package the EC hopes to demonstrate to its southern Mediterranean partners that it would like to participate more actively in their economic and social development. The three priorities the Community has set itself are to help the eight (1) reduce their dependence on imported foodstuffs, (2) diversify their agricultural production and (3) promote not only trade but also industrial, scientific and technological cooperation.

The Community had already assured them it would maintain existing import levels, even after the entry of Spain and Portugal.

\* 1 ECU = UK£ 0.71 or IR£ 0.78.