



# a newssheet for journalists

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EUROFORUMS

**INTERNAL MARKET: More than 800 technical standards await adoption by 31 December 1992**

The European Commission wants the experts to work faster.

Europeans who move house from one European Community country to another, or do no more than stay briefly in another EC country, have come face to face with the problem of differing technical standards. Even such simple tasks as plugging in an electric razor or hairdryer can prove to be a headache when plugs and sockets are incompatible. And what of the single market in all this? At the technical level the legislation adopted by the EC Council of Ministers in the framework of the 1992 programme sets out general safety requirements, such as the obligation to see that a washing machine is properly earthed. But the legislation is silent as regards the plug to be fitted to the machine. This is the role of a technical standard, drawn up by a committee of experts drawn from the Member States and called a standards body.

The work of standardization required by the single market is enormous. Some 300 pieces of Community legislation are already needed to complete the 1992 programme. But more than 800 European standards have already been adopted in the last six years - three times more than during the previous 20 years - and another 800 at least are needed between now and 31 December 1992 if there is to be a genuine single market, with European consumers able to buy where they like and businessmen to sell on a Community-wide basis.

But this implies the completion of one standard per day on average, and this clearly is not possible, given the speed at which things are currently moving. Hence the European Commission's call to all those responsible for drawing up European standards to work more quickly. In a Green Paper published on October 8 the Commission has even made a number of suggestions to this end. It has asked industrialists to invest more in standardization, by providing more funds for bodies involved in this work, supplying experts and proposing priorities. The Commission is asking these bodies to speed up their work, and calling on ministries in the 12 EC countries to grant substantial financial aid for standardization. The Commission expects both views and comments for the beginning of January at the latest. After that measures will have to be taken.

**SOCIETY: 1993 to be the European Year of the Elderly**

Euro-MPs back the European Commission's proposal, which they want to come into effect already from next year.

Europe's population is ageing, a fact it apparently does not want to look in the face. And yet, in seeking to forget its elderly, Europe is overlooking a key resource which belongs to it and which it should exploit, both in its own interest and in that of the elderly themselves. Hence the European Commission's proposal that 1993 be declared the European Year of the Elderly and Solidarity with Generations. The European Parliament has not only welcomed the proposal wholeheartedly but also adopted a report asking the Commission that preparations be made as from 1991, in order to ensure that the activities to be undertaken in the Member States and the Community as a whole are properly planned and coordinated.

The Euro-MPs have notably asked Brussels to present next year a series of directives aimed at harmonizing legislation dealing with the elderly and to strengthen solidarity towards them.

To begin with two directives, or "European laws", the first of which provides for flexibility as regards retirement age, the harmonization of age limits and schemes for the retired. The second directive will provide for the introduction of a minimum guaranteed pension for all elderly people, for an amount which corresponds to a fixed percentage of the average income in the Member State in question. In order to protect the elderly from social exclusion the European Parliament's report recommends that a European Charter for the elderly be drawn up. It also contains a recommendation aimed at developing social and cultural activities that reinforce the mobility of the elderly by ensuring they can lead dignified lives.

The European Parliament has also asked that consideration be given to the fact that the elderly are a far from homogenous group; in fact they can be divided into three groups: workers who are over 50 years of age, the retired and the very old (the majority of whom are women). The Euro-MPs favour a variety of actions, ranging from the creation of a European network of innovative action projects to the definition of a "European code of conduct" aimed at guaranteeing and maintaining a reasonable quality of life for all old people and including activities which occupy the elderly, encourage exchanges of information, promote studies and provide for the creation of a databank.

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Other activities envisaged by the Euro-MPs include the promotion of training and teaching programmes, research and the launch of innovative projects aimed at promoting the integration, autonomy and emancipation of elderly people. To this end the Euro-MPs have asked that a minimum of ECU 4.2mn.\* be earmarked for the programme in favour of the elderly. Some ECU 3mn. of this would be devoted to training programmes.

Far from turning a deaf ear to the European Parliament, the European Commissioner, Cardoso e Cunha, thanked it on behalf of the entire Commission. He asked the Euro-MPs to vote the additional funds needed by the Commission to conduct more detailed research.

\* 1 ECU = UK£0.70 or IR£0.77

#### **CONSUMERS: Towards a "European" liability for garages?**

The European Commission wants to harmonize the rules which apply to the service sector.

Mr. Brown has the brakes of his car repaired on Monday. He picks up the car the next morning and, while driving downhill on Wednesday, runs into a car in front of him. His brakes apparently failed him. But how can Mr. Brown obtain compensation? Mrs. Smith gave a dress to be dry-cleaned, but when she picked it up she discovered that most of the colours had faded. What resource has Mrs. Smith against the dry-cleaners? The fact is that the national laws of the 12 European Community countries often deal with such situations in very different ways. This can only be regarded as an anachronism in a Europe whose internal frontiers are due to disappear in just over two years' time, especially in view of the fact that everyone is a customer at one time or another of hairdressers, restaurants, garages, drycleaners, etc. More than 60% of Europeans work in the service sector and, what is more, once the single market is complete those wanting to go into business for themselves in another EC country than their own will be free to do so.

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It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the European Commission is proposing the harmonization of national rules as regards professional liability in this key sector of the Community's economy. The fact is services account for more than half the wealth created each year in the 12-nation Community.

The European Commission has proposed to the Twelve a "European law" which would hold those providing a service, such as garage owners, dry-cleaners, etc., responsible for the damage caused by them to individuals or their belongings. This principle would apply to all services, whether private or public, whether provided free of cost or against payment, which are not exclusively concerned with the manufacture of products. Such a system of liability is the most widespread in the Community at present. But this is not the case as regards the burden of proof.

National legislation sometimes requires the victim to prove that the professional in question was at fault. This is no easy task for the consumer, who seldom has the necessary technical knowledge. In practice, in the event of a dispute, judges often make fewer demands on the unfortunate victim than on the professional. But the European Commission would like the laws of the 12 Member States to treat all parties to a dispute in a balanced manner.

In our example - provided the Twelve adopt the Commission's proposal - Mr. Brown will have to prove that he has suffered material, and eventually physical, injury and that it is due to the fact that the repairs were not properly carried out - that the accident took place because the brakes failed to operate properly, for example. The garage, for its part, will have to prove that the repairs were properly carried out, or that the brakes were not the cause of the accident.

Similarly, Mrs. Smith would have to show that the dress was in good condition before it was given for dry-cleaning but is no longer fit to wear. The dry-cleaners will have to prove that no mistakes were made by them and that the customer had been warned of the risk of fading, given the poor quality of the fabric ...

**ENERGY: United we stand?**

The European Commission shows how to beat the crisis.

A friend in need is a friend indeed, as the adage has it. In the event of an oil shortage the 12 European Community countries should stand together, according to the European Commission. In order to give concrete expression to this solidarity, the Commission asked the Twelve at the end of October to give it additional powers which would enable it to release a part of the strategic oil stocks and to recommend to governments emergency energy saving measures. If the system now proposed were to be rapidly adopted by the Twelve, it could even operate during the present Gulf crisis, should the situation deteriorate further and threaten the Community's oil supplies.

At present a "European law" requires the Twelve to maintain oil stocks equal to 90 days' consumption. Each country manages its stocks in a way it considers most effective. The European Commission is now asking each of the Member States to set up a body to hold oil stocks - this already exist in four EC countries\* - adequate to meet 60 days' consumption.

The Commission is also seeking the right to require the Twelve, in the event of difficulties as regards supplies, to draw from stock the quantities needed to meet up to 30 days' consumption. A decision to run down stocks further, and by larger amounts, could only be taken by EC ministers. But the Commission also believes that it should be in a position to set, as a target for the Community as a whole, a reduction in oil consumption as well as the broad outlines of emergency measures to be taken by the Twelve.

The Commission's aim is to avoid a ban on the use of cars on Sundays in Germany and not Britain, for example. The emergency measures in question would range from turning down thermostats in public buildings to petrol rationing and include lower speed limits, less street lighting and fewer neon signs.

\* Denmark, France, Germany and the Netherlands.

**HEALTH: Tidying up the medicine cupboard**

The European Commission asks the Twelve to set up a European agency for the assessment and control of medicines.

Medicines in Europe are as varied and numerous as the dishes and recipes that are the glory of its regional cuisine, to the point where even the experts - doctors, pharmacists and veterinary surgeons - are often at a loss, not to speak of consumers, of both the two- and four-footed variety.

It is particularly in the context of the marketing of medicines that the problem has become difficult to control in Europe, and this despite a high degree of harmonization of national criteria and authorization procedures. The fact is that after more than ten years this harmonization has yet to yield the expected results, while mutual recognition has not led to concrete results. In most European Community countries the system for granting authorizations is in crisis, paralysed by the criticisms of consumer organizations and by the sheer number and complexity of cases to be examined.

Hence the need, especially in the light of the single market, for a fresh effort in this field. To this end the European Commission has just proposed to the Twelve the creation of a European agency, entrusted mainly with the task of evaluating new medicines, arbitrating the divergences regarding existing medicines and finally coordinating warnings and national checks.

The proposed agency would be a new set-up, which would result from the coming together and reinforcement of two existing committees, one dealing with pharmaceuticals, the other with veterinary medicines. Strengthened by new logistical, financial and administrative measures, the agency's role would be to coordinate the activities of evaluation and surveillance of medicines, conducted by the Member States, in order to avoid duplication. The new centralized Community procedure would be mandatory in the case of all new medicines created through biotechnology and for veterinary medicines designed to increase productivity, but would remain optional for other "innovative" medicines. Under this new Community procedure, medicines which had been cleared in one Member State would automatically be authorized for sale in all the others.

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However, it is the decentralized procedure which doubtless will be used most often after 1992. Based on the principle of mutual recognition, it will make it possible to extend progressively to other Member States the authorization for a medicine to be marketed in a given Member State, in return for important guarantees as regards quality, safety and effectiveness. The agency will not be involved in this procedure except in the event of disagreement between Member States, in which case it will give its opinion.

Companies will be more or less free to choose between these two procedures. The Commission also plans to allow them a period of adaptation ending in 1996, in order to prevent the system from becoming too bureaucratic. As for keeping a watch on medicines, it will remain the responsibility of the Member States.

#### **TRANSPORT: Making way for pedestrians**

The protection of pedestrians implies better roads and education.

To begin with, education. But also a good infrastructure. The fact is, this is the only way to avoid disabling people and, equally, not to be disabled oneself. The point was underlined by the European Transport Commissioner, Karel Van Miert, in an address to the European association for pedestrians in Brussels.

Following the European Year of Road Safety, the Commission has already submitted several proposals aimed at laying down the foundations of a European safety policy in such key areas as driving licences, speed limits and drunken driving. A directive (European law) was also adopted, requiring protective elements to be fixed to heavy vehicles. The Commission envisages improvements to the fittings on light vehicles, in order to protect pedestrians in case they are hit.



**INFLATION: Further price rises in September**

The surge in oil prices strikes the 12-nation Community.

Following the 0.6% rise in prices recorded in August for the European Community as a whole, prices have remained under the influence of the Gulf crisis. They rose by 0.7% in September, taking the rate of inflation over a 12-month period to 6.1%, the highest since July 1985. The United States was worse off with a 6.2% inflation rate, although Japan managed to hold its rate down to a more moderate 2.9%.

September's price rises were largely due to the surge in oil prices. The consumer price index for September rose by 1.1% in Spain and Portugal, by 0.9% in Britain and Belgium, 0.8% in the Netherlands and Denmark, 0.6% in Italy and Luxembourg and by 0.5% in France. Both Germany and Ireland recorded more moderate price rises.

However, the biggest price rise in September was recorded by Greece (3.5%). This was due not to the oil crisis but to higher prices after the summer sales for clothing and footwear, durable goods and leisure goods.

Prices have risen by 4.8% for the Community as a whole since the beginning of the year, as compared to only 3.9% over the same period in 1989. Inflation was already on the rise during the first half of this year and the Gulf crisis merely served to fuel the flames, as it were.

Even so, the anti-smoking lobby could take comfort in the fact that prices of tobacco products have been rising faster than the prices of the other commodities and services used to calculate the consumer price index. Thus in the 12-month period to August 1990, prices of tobacco products rose by 7.1% for the Community as a whole, as against only 5.8% for all the other items. This means that most Member States are implementing the recommendation contained in the "Europe against cancer" programme, to tax heavily cigarettes, cigars and other tobacco products.

There are exceptions to this, however. One is Ireland, where prices of tobacco products fell over 12 months, even while the general index, excluding tobacco, went up. In France tobacco prices remained stationary while the prices of other goods rose by 3.2%. Finally, in Britain tobacco prices rose more slowly than other prices over the same period.