



a newssheet for journalists

Weekly n° 1/91

7 - 14 January 1991

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Mailed from: Brussels X

EUROFORUMS

EUROBAROMETER POLL: Support for EC at an all-time high

Over two-thirds of Europeans regard EC membership as "a good thing".

Seven European citizens out of 10 (or 69% of them to be exact) are very happy to belong to the European Community, while fewer than one in ten (or 7%) are unhappy, according to the latest of the twice yearly Eurobarometer polls of public attitudes towards the Community. Although some 18% of those polled were undecided, it would seem that many who once turned their backs on the Community are now singing its praises. The fact is that Denmark recorded the sharpest rise in the proportion of the population that regards the country's membership of the EC as "a good thing"; it was up from 42% a year ago to 58% today. The Dutch led the field as always, with 82% very happy to belong to the EC. They were followed by the Italians (77%); Luxemburgers, Irish and Greeks (76%) and Germans and Belgians (73%). German satisfaction with the Community in fact has risen sharply, thanks to the enthusiasm shown by the inhabitants of the former East Germany. As many as 87% of them came down strongly on the side of the EC, with none against. This is further confirmation of the Community's prestige outside its own frontiers, given that until two months ago the East Germans were as yet "foreigners".

As for Community reform, it would seem that there is a large majority in favour of the major proposals discussed at the inter-governmental conferences held in Rome in mid-December. Thus 66% favoured a common policy in matters of security and defense, with just 15% opposed to it. Some 64% wanted the European Parliament to have the right to decide on Community legislation, together with the Council of Ministers, as compared to the 14% who were against it. Fifty-six percent were in favour of a European Central Bank (with 18% opposing it), while 55% supported a single common currency, which would replace the different national currencies, as compared to 23% who opposed it. There was a majority even in favour of a Community foreign policy, with 59% voting for it and just 26% against it.

Nor were the replies based on a Utopian view of the Community. Confirmation of this was provided by the answers to the questions regarding the Gulf crisis. While a majority felt a war involving military forces from several European countries was unlikely in the coming months (52% as compared to 39%), as many as 70% thought that the Community should form a common defence organization and 61% that the EC should speed up its political, economic

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and monetary integration. Fifty percent (against 33%) went so far as to call for the creation of a European rapid deployment force.

It is hardly surprising that the "logic of war" should have led to an increase in the numbers of those who feel that the new year will be worse than the old. The 27% who claimed that 1991 will be worse was the highest recorded in the Community since the mid-1980s. Even so, 37% of those polled thought that the new year will be better than 1990 after all, while 28% claimed it will be much the same.

ENVIRONMENT: How healthy are European forests?

A forest health report after three years of a regulation against air pollution.

The 1989 report on the condition of European Community forests points to a certain improvement, after three years of implementation of an EC regulation aimed at fighting atmospheric pollution.

The results of the 1989 survey indicate that considerable parts of Community forests are damaged. Even so, while nearly 10% of the trees suffered defoliation of more than 25% in 1989, the corresponding figure for 1987 was 14.3% and for 1988 10.2%. On the other hand, in 1989 16% of trees presented a discolouration of more than 10%, as compared to 13.5% in 1987 and 13.2% in 1988. It must be added, however, that the samples for the two previous years were much smaller. The damage to conifers was slightly more than to broadleaves, even if the differences are not significant. Studies show that the main reason for the deterioration in the health of Community forests is pollution, especially atmospheric pollution.

AIR TRAVEL: Overbooking with a human face

The Twelve adopt a common system for compensating passengers.

From this year those travelling by scheduled airlines will find overbooking easier to put up with. While airlines will be able to continue to overbook, they will have to adopt a more sympathetic attitude towards its victims. The fact is the European Community Council of Ministers agreed on December 18 to a set of rules designed to make overbooking more palatable. The practice itself is felt to be necessary to fill aircraft, given the no-shows.

Under these rules, whenever there are more passengers than seats, airlines will have to give priority to the elderly and disabled; to unaccompanied children and those travelling for reasons of health or the death of a near relative as well as to holders of reduced fare tickets, such as Apex and Super-apex. Passengers travelling on complimentary tickets, including airline employees, will have to wait for the next flight.

What is more, airlines will have to provide alternative solutions to passengers left stranded and look after them while they wait. And, finally, airlines will have to compensate victims of overbooking, on the basis of the time lost and distance to be covered, with a minimum of ECU 75* for a delay of less than two hours and a distance of under 3,500 km.; and twice this amount for longer delays. The compensation for delays of under four hours and distances of more than 3,500 km. would be ECU 150 at least - and twice this amount for delays of more than four hours.

For the European Transport Commissioner, Karel Van Miert, who proposed this formula a year ago, the agreement reached by the Twelve has two advantages: (1) it offers passengers a certain degree of protection and (2) it should encourage airlines to reduce overbooking to a minimum.

Mr Van Miert now plans to take a closer look at overbooking on charter flights, with a view to proposing a "Community law", should it prove necessary.

* 1 ECU = UK£0.70 or IR£0.77

TAXATION: The Twelve agree on the post-1992 system ...
... for alcohol, tobacco and petrol.

In the 1993 single market Europeans will be able to buy cigarettes, alcoholic beverages and petrol in whichever country they like - and without being asked to declare their purchases at the Community's internal borders. In order to make this possible, without loss of tax revenue for the countries in which these products are eventually consumed, the EC Council of Ministers reached agreement on December 17 on a European system of excise duties, the special taxes levied on alcohol, tobacco products and petrol. However, before the Community's internal borders can allow unrestricted passage, the Twelve must agree during 1991 on the level of excise duties, which vary greatly at present from one EC country to another.

The system adopted for excise duties, which will be final, completes the provisional system for VAT adopted by the Twelve at the beginning of December and applicable between 1993 and 1996. It provides that alcoholic beverages, tobacco and petrol can be transported free of excise duties within the Community, to their final destination, where the wholesaler or trader will pay the duty, which will then be added to the sales price. Individuals will pay the excise duty at the time of purchasing the product in question.

UNEMPLOYMENT: In decline in 9 EC regions out of 10 in 1990

But the highest unemployment rate is some 20 times higher than the lowest.

The fall in unemployment which the European Community as a whole registered last year was evident in 9 regions out of 10 according to the regional statistics published in mid-December by Eurostat, the Community's statistical office. In the 12 months to April 1990 the unemployment rate fell from 9% to 8.3% in the Community as a whole. Only in parts of Denmark and Portugal, in Corsica, the Canary Islands and certain areas of Bavaria was there a rise in unemployment.

Regional differences remained substantial, however. The Spanish territories of Ceuta and Melilla, on the North African coast, had an unemployment rate of just under 30%, which was some 20 times higher than that of Luxembourg (1.5%). Most areas of Spain and many parts of Italy had unemployment rates well above the Community average.

TRANSPORT: Fewer border checks and more language courses

An open road for lorry drivers in the run-up to 1992.

Preparations for the single market are going on throughout the 12-nation European Community. From 1 January 1992 the Community will form a single unit for lorries adorned with the blue and white TIR markings, thanks to an EC Council of Ministers decision of mid-December, putting an end from that date to the special border formalities currently required of such lorries. The fact is that TIR (Transport International Routier) lorries travel from one country to another under the provisions of a United Nations convention of 1975.

The Twelve decided at the same time to end the specific formalities of the ATA system, to which goods in transit are subject under another international convention.

The gradual elimination of checks at the Community's internal borders obviously requires unfailing cooperation and total confidence between the customs authorities of the 12 Member States. This is not easy, however, for officials accustomed to thinking in national terms.

To help them adapt to their new, European role, the Commission launched an experimental training and exchange programme in 1989. It was baptized "Matthaeus", the name in Latin - and German - of the evangelist Matthew, who collected taxes in Palestine for the Romans some 2,000 years ago. Thanks to Matthaeus, 578 customs officials have been able to familiarize themselves with Europe.

The Commission is now asking the Twelve to launch a definitive version of the Matthaeus programme early this year. It would last three years and would be of interest to both customs officials who must apply European procedures or engage in the fight against fraud and to those who train them.

If the Twelve adopt Matthaeus, the customs officials selected under the programme will follow courses in the European Community, undergo intensive training in other European languages and work in another EC country thanks to a programme which twins customs offices. Finally, Matthaeus should stimulate cooperation between national customs administrations at all levels.

EMPLOYMENT: The European Commission is seeking the right to written proof ...

... for all workers without an employment contract.

Does every worker really know just whom he is working for, and under what conditions? The question is not as far-fetched as it might appear at first sight. The fact is that the traditional terms of employment - from nine to five, usually at the same workplace - are not the only ones now on offer. Workers increasingly are being offered part-time jobs and temporary employment; they are being offered work to be done at home or in another country or to be divided between several workers. Very often there is no employment contract, not even a written document. In order to make sure that those without a written contract know just what their job involves, the European Commission asked the Twelve at the end of November to adopt a "European law" requiring employers to provide their workers written proof of their activities, one month after they had been taken on at the very latest.

This proof would take the form of a statement clearly identifying both the employer and the worker; the place of work; the duration of the job and its nature; and the level of the wages and method of payment. The statement would also indicate which social security system - and collective agreements - applied.

EMPLOYMENT: Coming shortly - European Works Councils?

The European Commission wants to improve the information provided workers.

The European Community's major undertakings are acquiring the dimensions of the emerging single market. While they are setting up subsidiaries in several EC countries, no national legislation provides for the information and consultation of workers on a Community-wide basis. In practice only a very small number of initiatives have made possible the creation of European bodies representing workers employed by the large industrial groupings. It was in order to fill this gap that the European Commission proposed to the Twelve in early December a "European law", under which European Works Councils would be set up for undertakings of groups with a total workforce of at least 1,000 and with establishments in at least two Community countries.

These Councils would be set up only with the agreement of workers' representatives. They would not modify existing national systems and would not require management to divulge information which could harm the undertaking.

COPYRIGHT: The European Commission proposes an action programme
... to ensure royalty payments and to combat piracy.

Royalty payments are an important source of income for authors, actors and signers as well as for record manufacturers and radio and television organizations. They amount to between ECU 150 and 250 billion* each year, which is roughly 5% of the European Community's GDP, or Gross Domestic Product.

But the arts are also an important transmission belt for Europe's cultural identity. As the European Commissioner for the audiovisual industry, Mr Jean Dondelinger, has pointed out, "the quality of a civilisation is measured by the respect a society accords its creative spirits and their works."

There are important disparities, however, in the legislation adopted by the Member States to protect copyright and ensure royalty payments. To guarantee compliance with the relevant legislation and avoid the growth of a market for pirated works, the European Commission is asking the Twelve to adopt an ambitious action programme, aimed at the upward harmonization of the various national laws.

To begin with the Commission is inviting Member States that have not already adhered to the Berne Convention on the protection of literary and artistic works, and the Rome Convention on the protection of similar rights, to do so before the end of 1992. Two EC countries, Belgium and Ireland, have not yet ratified the Act of Paris, which is the second revision of the Berne Convention, while five countries - Belgium, Greece, the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain - have yet to ratify the Rome Convention.

The Commission is of the view that their adhesion to the two Conventions would provide a common basis for harmonization, on which Community legislation relating to royalties and similar payments could be based.

The Commission next takes up the delicate problem of rental fees, which concerns mainly the market for audio and video cassettes and compact discs. The fact is that if the sale of cassettes is protected in all the Member States, this is not the case as regards their rental. Thus in Germany, the Netherlands and Ireland, the law automatically allows a work to be rented out, without the authorization of the copyright holders, once it has been put on sale. In other Member States the law offers copyright holders a relatively high level of protection.

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The problem of the differences in the level of protection granted by the Member States is further compounded by rapid technological advances, such as the development of digital recording, which allows large-scale copying without loss of sound quality. The financial loss for authors is two-fold: they seldom receive payment when their works are loaned out while the rental of pirated works simply results in a sharp fall in sales.

The Commission is therefore proposing a directive which grants copyright holders an exclusive right to ban, or authorize, the loan or rental of their works. Thus, in order to be able to offer a work for rent, it would be necessary to obtain the authorization of the copyright holder, as in the case of sales. However, in the case of loans for non-commercial purposes (by a public library, for example) Member States could grant the right to payment instead of an exclusive right.

From next year three other proposals for European directives will be put before the Twelve. The first is aimed at individuals who copy programmes for their own use; the proposal provides for a tax on empty cassettes. The second deals with the legal protection of databanks and the third with the harmonization of the length of time for which copyright and other similar rights are granted.

Finally, the Commission has undertaken to carry out, before the end of 1992, a series of studies and analyses on a variety of subjects, including photocopying and collective management companies.

As regards the projected directive on the right of rental, the file is already with the Twelve. If they follow the Commission, royalty payment will be extended to an area hardly covered at present, that of loans and rentals.

* 1 ECU = UK£0.70 or IR£0.77