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OPINION POLL: Europeans look to 1992 - and beyond

The European Commission publishes its latest Eurobarometer.

Most Europeans want quicker progress towards a genuine European Community. They favour the single internal market and feel the effects of the main changes forecast for 1992 will be positive. In fact nearly half would like to see the Community move even further in the direction of European unification, according to the latest survey of public opinion in the 12-nation Community, the European Commission's Eurobarometer.

One European in two feels that Europe is moving ahead very slowly, while nearly 2 out of 3 would like progress to be much swifter, according to the poll, conducted last December. In all 12 Community countries, with the exception of Denmark, more than half of those polled would like Europe to make faster progress. This was especially true of public opinion in Italy, France and Luxembourg.

Some 57% of all those interviewed felt the single, internal market, set for 1992, to be "a good thing". This was the case in all EC countries except Britain and Denmark. The Italians, Belgians and Luxembourgers believed most strongly in the single market, followed by the Portuguese. Its supporters were in a majority in Britain and Denmark also but the subject left as many as 30% indifferent.

The aspect of the single market which attracted the most support was the possibility it offered of being able to buy, in one's own country, all the goods on sale in the other Community countries. The aspect which aroused the least interest was the opening up of government contracts to the firms of all 12 member states. Even so, as many as 54% of those polled saw it as an advantage of the single market.

As for going even further along the road to European unification than the single market, some 60% of those polled were in favour, with the Italians the most supportive of moves in this direction and the Danes the least. Among those in favour, nearly two-thirds wanted Europe to strengthen cooperation in scientific research and technology while just under half favoured a Community currency.

One in two of those interviewed favoured a European government. However, 22% were against the idea and another 28% indifferent. In four countries more than half were in favour: Italy, France, Belgium and Luxembourg.

SMEs: New services and more cash in the run-up to 1992

A progress report on the action programme for helping smaller companies.

The European Commission has been steadily implementing the European Community's action programme for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) since its adoption at the end of 1986. Since last June its SME Task Force has been busy setting up an information service and encouraging companies to cooperate with each other. New financing methods are being devised to help SMEs and the Commission has put forward proposals aimed at adapting some of the rules of the game to meet their needs.

The Commission has just published its second report on the implementation of the 1986 action programme. It notes that the business information service is already in operation. Even in its pilot stage the Euro-Info-Centres network enables companies, located anywhere in the Community, to obtain information on all aspects of Community regulations and activities of interest to them. Moreover, thanks to ICONE, companies can, since last December, procure the technical standards in force in other EC countries from their own standards institute.

The system for helping SMEs get in touch with each other is taking shape. From this April, they will be able to send both offers and requests for cooperation to the computerized network, BC-NET, through the business counsellors. BC-NET will make it easier for SMEs to enter into commercial, financial and technical agreements with each other.

The pilot scheme "Europartenariat '88" should speed up the economic development of Ireland, thanks to the participation of SMEs in the other 11 member states in the projects of their Irish counterparts.

As for financing SMEs and their activities, the European Commission has made it a point to see to it that they can take advantage of the various forms of Community aid which are already available. The European Commissioner for SMEs and financial engineering, Abel Matutes, has also taken the initiative in opening up new financing possibilities for the SMEs. To this end the Commission has encouraged the creation and expansion of companies offering venture capital to the regions of the Community which are disadvantaged or in economic decline.

More than half the participants in the two Community R & D programmes - BRITE* and ESPRIT** - are SMEs.

The European Commission is either preparing or has already sent to the member states several measures aimed at adapting the regulations regarding VAT, company accounts and insurance to the needs of SMEs.

* Basic Research in Industrial Technology in Europe

** European Strategic Programme for Research and Development in Information Technology

RESEARCH: A common market for economists also

The Commission wants the Twelve to adopt SPES.

The single market, set for 1992, involves studies, forecasts and economic decisions. But, surprising as it may seem, economists in the 12 European Community countries have had very little to do with the birth of the common market. The European Commission clearly believes they have a bigger role to play and it has therefore sent the Twelve a programme of cooperation between European economists, to be known as SPES* - which, incidentally, is also Latin for hope.

The Commission has noted that European economists tend to work on purely national problems. When they do team up with economists from other countries they show a preference for their American counterparts. This is all the more regrettable, in the Commission's view, as good economists are certainly not in short supply within the Community.

To encourage them to devote their talents to helping build Europe, the Commission proposes giving economists scholarships and grants to set up a European research network, organizing seminars and even facilitating the return of young economists who have emigrated elsewhere.

The programme would cost ECU 6m** in all for the period from 1989 to 1992. The economists would tackle seven major themes, among them employment and social policy and the North-South divide in Europe.

* Stimulation Plan for Economic Sciences

** 1 ECU = UK£ 0.69 or IR£ 0.78

SMEs: Going it alone

The Twelve are asked to back single-person companies.

The company with the smallest number of shareholders would obviously have just one. However, the private limited company with a single shareholder is recognized in only five of the 12 European Community countries: Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany and the Netherlands. This has led the European Commission to ask the Twelve to authorize this form of company throughout the EC, on the basis of a Community directive.

The Commission has drafted its proposal in the context of the action programme for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Its aim is to allow the maximum number of entrepreneurs to enjoy the advantages of the single person company. The most important of these is a separation between private and professional property, so that the entrepreneur can limit his liability to the capital values of the company's shares. Closing down a business is also easier if it is in the form of a single-person company.

PEOPLE'S EUROPE: The right of establishment

The retired are not entirely free to settle where they like.

Character references, evidence of home ownership or tenancy of a residence, a guaranteed income, a doctor's certificate to the effect that the applicant requires neither medical nor surgical treatment ... It clearly is far from easy for a European who has retired to settle in France, given the large number of documents which have to be furnished to the French authorities - in advance.

The Belgian Euro-MP, Anne-Marie Lizin, has raised the problem in a written question to the European Commission. She has also asked if other European Community countries follow a similar procedure.

The Commission has pointed out that as Community law now stands, the right of residence is granted to pensioners only in the member state in which they were in paid employment or were self-employed. For the others, the conditions to be met and procedures to be followed are dealt with entirely by national law.

In order to overcome this shortcoming, the European Commission prepared a draft directive in 1979 - but it still awaits the Council's pleasure.

Under this directive, which has been revised several times, the host country may ask the person wanting to settle in its territory for documentary evidence that he, and the members of his family, have sufficient resources and suitable accommodation. The host country may also invoke public policy, public security and public health when dealing with applications.

All that Brussels is asking is a recognition of the right of residence for all Community citizens, including the retired, in the territory of another member state.

CONSUMERS: Minitels across the Rhine

The European Commission tries to move towards a common market in videotex terminals.

French and German users of videotex services will have access to each others network by simply picking up the telephone. Thanks to the European Commission the telecommunications authorities in the two countries agreed at the end of February to allow access to each other's videotex networks, even though the two systems are incompatible.

This brings to an end a long-running saga of the uncommon market for modems, a piece of equipment which connects computers via the telephone network, for instance. In a number of European Community countries modems are supplied exclusively by the national telecommunications administrations. Following the European Commission's intervention, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands have agreed to give up, within two years, a monopoly which is contrary in fact to the EEC Treaty.

As the modem is integrated in the French videotex terminal, Minitel, the German PTT was able to use this to refuse it approval, until the Commission intervened. Germans now have access to the French videotex service Teletel, while the French have access to the German service, Bildschirmtext.

In future, modems will have a more European look: last July the Twelve decided to refrain from introducing new technical standards for a 12-month period, during which common standards - NETs - are to be worked out.

BATTERY HENS: A narrow escape!

The Twelve have set the minimum cage size at 450 cm².

European Community battery hens have had a narrow escape! On February 23, the European Court of Justice overturned, on procedural grounds, a 1986 Community directive which guaranteed them a minimum of 450 cm² per cage. However, on March 7, the Community's agricultural ministers re-adopted the same Directive, this time by scrupulously sticking to their rules of procedure.

The Court's judgement did not affect the legislation implementing the Community directive which the individual member states had adopted. But, of course, it left the way open for the latter to withdraw or modify this legislation.

ENVIRONMENT: 12-star beaches

Blue flags will flutter once again over the Community's cleaner beaches and ports.

Springtime - and many already see themselves, in the mind's eye, spending their summer holidays on golden beaches in sight of picturesque fishing ports.

To help make sure that beaches and ports remain clean and inviting, the Blue Flags of Europe campaign is being run again this year. Started by the Foundation for Environmental Education in Europe (FEEE), the campaign gives out flags - in fact the European Community flag with its 12 gold stars - to beaches and ports which meet certain criteria as regards the quality of their water, the protection of natural sites and measures to prevent pollution.

Last year 380 beaches and 72 ports were awarded the Blue Flag out of the 1,076 beaches and 217 ports which took part. The success of the 1987 campaign has encouraged the European Commission, the FEEE and the steering committee of the European Year of the Environment to repeat it this year. The prizes will be awarded at the beginning of June, as the tourist season opens.

To qualify, beaches are subject to test to see if they conform to the Community's directive on bathing water. The local authorities must provide information on the quality of the bathing water and protect any sites of special natural importance. Ports must also pass test of water quality and take measures to guard against pollution.

All of which will ensure connoisseurs 12-star beaches and ports.

PEOPLE'S EUROPE: The word "Customs" to disappear from the Community's internal borders

New signboards will be in place before the end of the year.

March 4 was a red-letter day for Caia-Badajoz, the customs post on the border between Spain and Portugal. The word "Customs" was scrubbed from the signboard in the presence of a distinguished gathering, which included a vice-president of the European Commission, Manuel Marín, and two Commissioners, Cardoso e Cunha and Abel Matutes, as well as representatives of Spain and Portugal.

It was the first of a number of ceremonies which will accompany the introduction of new signboards at the Community's internal borders. During the course of the year all the old ones, with the word "Customs" emblazoned on them, will be torn down. In their place will be put up sparkling new signboards, showing the name of the country set in the Community emblem.

In the Middle Ages the philosophers held that ideas and concepts are only words or "names". Logically, therefore, if the word were to disappear so would the thing it represents. No signboard marked "Customs", no Customs.

Travellers entering the Community, or driving within it, have no means at present of knowing where they are. The new signboards will help generate or strengthen a sense of belonging to Europe. Of course, the customs post will not really disappear until 1992, with the completion of the common market. But it is equally important that Europeans become aware of the reality of the European Community as from now.

Further evidence that the Community is taking shape, slowly but surely, was provided on January 1, with the sudden disappearance of the mountain of paperwork with which lorry drivers had hitherto been confronted each time they crossed from one Community country to another. In its place: the Single Administrative Document, which is also valid between the EC and the 6-nation European Free Trade Association (EFTA).

TRANSPORT: The coach or lorry operator and the single market

The Commission wants changes to the rules for setting up a road transport business in the run-up to 1992.

The European Commission has proposed a number of changes to the rules for people wanting to get into the road transport business or to set themselves up as coach or lorry operators in the European Community. The proposal reflects the demand by the EC Council of Ministers for more harmonization of the competitive conditions in this sector of the transport industry, as part of the moves towards a single market in road transport from 1992.

New entrants will have to be of more than "good repute" as required at present. They will have to show they have not been convicted in the three previous years of any offence which would make them unsuitable for the transport business, including offences against drivers' hours, road safety or management regulations.

New entrants will also have to provide a financial guarantee, representing 10% of the value as new of each vehicle used in the business. Finally, they will have to pass an examination in the range of subjects set out in the original Community directive. At present, an examination is not obligatory, although most member states require one. The Commission's proposals would also add to the list of subjects the transport of dangerous goods and road safety.

The European Commission wants member states to exchange information on offences committed by non-resident hauliers which could lead to the withdrawal of their operating licence. Where a licence has been withdrawn, all other member states would have to be informed, under the Commission's draft proposals.