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Mailed from Brussels X

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europa focus

EUROPE: Germany ratifies Maastricht

The Karlsruhe constitutional court removes the last obstacle on the road to European Union.

The Treaty of Maastricht, signed by the Twelve on 7 February 1992, has cleared the last of the hurdles it faced. It will come into force on 1 November 1993, as announced by Germany's economics minister, Günther Rexrodt, after the decision of the German constitutional court. The Treaty provides for European citizenship, an institutional overhaul and a common currency, as well as a common foreign and defense policy.

The European Commission, speaking through its President, Jacques Delors, expressed its satisfaction that Germany, a founder member of the EC, "was continuing to contribute to the democratic construction of a Europe united in the diversity of its national and regional personalities, traditions and cultures".

"The green light given by the Karlsruhe constitutional court will give a fresh impetus to the European Community", President Delors added. "I am satisfied, even if it is not the only solution to Europe's problems. Nevertheless, the Treaty, despite its shortcomings, is a stimulus to improve the economic situation, and the fact that it is to be implemented is an element of optimism".

Belgium's prime minister, Jean-Luc Dehaene, who also holds the rotating presidency of the European Council until the end of the year, stressed that the Court's decision "removes the last obstacle to the Treaty's ratification", and makes it possible to envisage its entry into force on 1 November 1993, immediately after the special European Council, set for October 29 and entrusted with the task of implementing it rapidly. The Belgian prime minister expressed the view that the German stand should "put an end to a long period during which the Treaty of Maastricht has been called into question, thus opening the way to European recovery".

But after the turbulence which has accompanied the Treaty during the last 20 months, it is all the more necessary to remain prudent, even though a decisive, perhaps historic, milestone has been passed in the building of Europe.

ENVIRONMENT: The condition of Europe's forests is going from bad to worse
The results of the 1992 damage survey point to a widespread deterioration covering nearly all the main tree species.

Nearly one tree out of five in the European Community is showing needle- or leaf-loss of more than 25%. If one looks at Europe as a whole, nearly one tree out of four is damaged in this way. In some countries the situation is extremely serious. Thus in Britain 58.3% of the trees showed this level of defoliation (and as many as 67.8% in the case of broad-leaved trees, but "limited" to 52.7% in the case of coniferous species). The Czech republic was next, with 56.4%, followed by Poland with 48.8%, Latvia with 37% and Slovakia with 36%. Of the 31 countries which forwarded the results of their damage survey, only three (Austria with 6.9%, France with 8% and the Russian Federation with 5.4% but for only coniferous species) scored under 10%. In the other 14 countries (among them Ireland, Belgium, Greece, Italy and Spain) some 10% to 20% of the trees have suffered from defoliation rates of over 25%. In the 14 remaining countries more than 20% of the trees have suffered damage. The list includes Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal and Denmark, with Britain's forests ranking as the most seriously affected (58.3%).

One must be prudent when making comparisons, however, given (1) the differences in the ways in which the common methodology is applied and (2) the great diversity as regards climate and topography. But the fact remains that the rapidity with which damage has occurred is impressive. Thus in Britain the proportion of damaged trees, irrespective of species, rose from 22% in 1987 to 25% in 1988, 28% in 1989, 39% in 1990, 56.7% in 1991 and 58.3% last year. And the situation in other EC countries is not very different. Nevertheless, signs of improvement can be noticed elsewhere in the EC, often after a number of difficult years. Thus in Denmark, for example, the proportion of damaged trees fell from 29.9% in 1991 to **25.9% the following year, and in Portugal from 29.6% to 22.5%. But the situation is highly critical on the whole.**

These statistics are to be found in the sixth report of the European Commission on this subject. It is the second to be prepared jointly with the international cooperative programme of the U.N. Economic Commission for Europe for the assessment and monitoring of air pollution effects on forests. The report contains the results of a survey of 34 European countries, covering 622,000 sample trees and 184m. hectares of European forests, out of a total of 222mn.

Both the national and transnational surveys have indicated that the most important causes for the defoliation and discolouration which have been observed are adverse weather conditions, insect and fungi attacks, forest fires and air pollution, human activity and game. Even so, atmospheric pollution, whether by itself or in combination with other agents, is regarded as a major cause of defoliation in 42.9% of cases for Europe as a whole and in 51.6% of cases for just the EC, while the corresponding figures for excessive discolouration are 37.6% for Europe and 57.8% for just the EC.

The report concludes that in the coming years it will be necessary to continue with the efforts to reduce atmospheric pollution and to step up even more the surveillance of forest ecosystems, in order to establish clearly the reasons for forest damage.

EMPLOYMENT: Banning child labour

The Twelve agree on a "European law" aimed at protecting youngsters.

A ban on the employment of children who are under 15 years of age, or even older, if the school-leaving age is higher in their country, is the main feature of a directive ("European law") on which EC ministers reached agreement in mid-October, pending its examination by the European Parliament. This prohibition is not purely symbolic, as one might think: child labour is not confined to the pages of Dickens and Zola, or to be found only in distant Third World countries.

The directive nevertheless contains derogations: account must be taken of tasks which only a child can undertake. This is the case as regards the entertainment and advertising industries and professional sport, an activity specifically mentioned in the directive.

"Light work" provides another exception. These are activities which do not threaten the health, safety and growth of young children, nor prevent them from going to school and doing their homework. Such work is allowed under the directive, for a limited number of hours, to be set by each EC country, for children 13 years of age or older and, in less severe fashion, for children who are 14 years of age or older.

The directive also makes an exception in the case of work carried out in the context of an apprenticeship or training programme which combines attendance at school with practical training, subject to certain rules.

For countries which do not require children to remain at school until the age of 18, the directive stipulates that the employment of youngsters between the ages of 15 and 18 must be strictly regulated.

The directive also makes it illegal to employ young people on tasks which expose them to dangerous substances or which exceed their physical or psychological capacities. It also regulates the hours of work, rest periods and holidays as well as night work. There is a ban on working between 10 p.m. and 6 p.m., or between 11 p.m. and 7 a.m.

Britain has been exempted from the application of some of the rules covering young people between the ages of 15 and 18 for a 4-year period, to run from the time the directive comes into force.

AUDIOVISUAL INDUSTRY: GATT or no GATT?

"Yes, but ... " is the European Community's answer.

The audiovisual sector has become an international preoccupation. Heads of state or government, ministers and stage and screen celebrities are engaged in a war of words across the Atlantic. At the heart of the debate is the question of whether or not films, whether for the cinema or television, should be included in the agreement now being negotiated in the GATT*, with a view to reducing the obstacles to international trade in goods and services.

For the EC the question in fact is two-fold: on the one hand, how to maintain the numerous national and regional aids to the audiovisual industry and, on the other, preserve the European "law" - known as "Television without frontiers" - which requires broadcasters to devote 50% of broadcasting time to European productions in the field of fiction - films, serials and soap operas.

When EC ministers for the arts met in Mons (Belgium) on October 4, they set out six objectives for the European Commission in the current round of GATT negotiations:

- 1) preserve the regional, national and European schemes for helping the audiovisual sector;
- 2) maintain the operating subsidies currently given to organizations in the audiovisual sector, at both EC and Member State levels;
- 3) maintain the ability to regulate existing and future technologies and transmission techniques for the Community and its Member States;
- 4) maintain the freedom for the EC and its Member States to adopt new measures designed to help the audiovisual sector;
- 5) exclude the audiovisual sector from the principle, envisaged in the GATT, of the progressive liberalization of trade, and

- 6) continue with the implementation of the "Television without frontiers" directive.

All European leaders are agreed on these objectives, including ministers, the European Commission and those working in the audiovisual industry. Where they differ is on how they are to be reached. Most European film directors, producers and actors, and the French government, would like to see the audiovisual sector treated as an "exception" within GATT: in other words, the EC could adopt measures contrary to the rules of international trade in this field. EC circles in Brussels have pointed out that under GATT rules, which have been introduced over the years since the end of the 1940s, the concept of "exception" does not authorize measures which discriminate between signatories to the GATT. However, the "Television without frontiers" directive, for example, makes a distinction between European productions, including those from some non-EC countries, and others, dealing with them differently.

European experts therefore tend to favour another solution. They would include the audiovisual sector in the future trade agreement under the GATT, but the Community would introduce reservations under which it would be allowed to keep its "Television without frontiers" directive in legal security. For the rest, EC experts point out that the rules as currently envisaged in the GATT trade negotiations do not prevent public support, subsidies and regulations at the level of both the EC and its Member States. The Community need only obtain from its trading partners - the United States in particular - an assurance that GATT will not eventually condemn these rules and support. This is what the experts describe as the "culture specificity" of the audiovisual sector.

Faced with the position of the United States, which tends to regard films and television programmes as goods to be traded as freely as possible, the EC clearly has its work cut out.

If the French government is more fearful than others of the liberalization of world trade in audiovisual products, it is partly because France is the largest producer by far of films for cinemas. What is more, nearly half this output is co-produced with other countries, usually European.

* General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade.

POLL: Unemployment tops the list of European concerns

It is the problem for two people out of three.

For 67% of the people living in the 12-nation European Community, unemployment is the most important problem facing the EC, far ahead of European monetary instability (10%), nationalism (10%) and inflation (9%). This is one of the findings of a poll carried out for the European Commission in time for European Employment Week, and published on the eve of it, on October 18. Unemployment returns, therefore, to occupy centre stage, although the issue which earlier polls showed to be the main preoccupation - environmental deterioration - did not appear in the questionnaire this time.

Europeans are not simply concerned about unemployment; they feel directly threatened by it: 43% of those who have a job are afraid of losing it, as against the 55% who are untouched by such fears. Among the self-employed, 46% fear they will have to give up their activity, a fear not shared by 52% of them.

But what is to be done to fight unemployment, which now affects more than 10% of the Community's workforce? "Better education and vocational training" was the answer given by 83% of those polled. Only 12% of them opposed this solution. Besides, vocational training does not seem to be particularly well-developed in the 12-nation Community: only 22% of those polled had received training in the context of their job over the last five years.

Some 67% of Europeans believe taxes must be reduced in order to fight unemployment; however, 57% would be prepared to pay higher taxes if they were certain that the money would be used to create jobs. However, only 27% of those polled believe reduced social security benefits will reduce the number of jobless; for 35% of them the solution lies in a shorter working week, although 43% would like to see it kept at its present level, while 13% want to work longer hours.

CULTURE: European architectural heritage

European Commission announces its 1994 action in support of pilot projects.

The European Commission, backed by the European Parliament, has just launched its 1994 action in support of pilot projects to conserve the European architectural heritage. The theme chosen for next year is "historic buildings and sites related to entertainment and the performing arts".

It covers monuments and sites which are the physical testimonies of the performing arts in a broad sense, such as theatres, concert halls, opera houses and cinemas - buildings which have a historic, architectural, artistic and social value of European importance. Priority will be given to projects aimed at the conservation of monuments and sites created for the performing arts and still serving this purpose.

The rules for this scheme are published in the Official Journal of the European Communities (N° C 275 and S 200 of 13 October 1993). The regulations and application form can be obtained from the national or regional organizations responsible for monuments and sites, as well as the offices of the European Commission in the various Member States.

Commission offices in:

England: Jean Monnet House, 8 Storey's Gate, London SW1P 3AT -
Tel: 973 19 92
Wales: 4 Cathedral Road, Cardiff CF1 9SG - Tel: 37 16 13
Scotland: 9 Alva Street, Edinburgh EH2 4PH - Tel: 225 20 58
Northern Ireland: Windsor House, 9/15 Bedford Street, Belfast BT2 7EG -
Tel: 24 07 08
Ireland: 39 Molesworth Street, Dublin 2, Tel: 671 22 44

The regulations can also be obtained from the "Culture Unit" (DG X/C/1) of the Commission of the European Communities (Office T-120 4/51), 120 rue de Trèves, B-1049 Brussels, Belgium. Applications must be submitted before 31 January 1994.

The theme for 1995 will focus on the conservation/restoration of religious monuments.