eurofocus

EUROPEAN COMMISSION
Directorate-General "Information, Communication, Culture and Audiovisual"

a newssheet for journalists

Weekly N° 10/94 — 14 - 21 March 1994

SUMMARY

Mailed from Brussels X

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OPINION POLL: The European Union is increasingly important for East Europeans ...

... but its image is being slowly tarnished.

Contradictions are legion in Warsaw and in all Central and East European countries, including Russia, since the fall of Communism and since the initial euphoria has given way to fear and perplexity.

Democracy, to begin with. If one excludes the Czechs, nearly everywhere else the dominant feeling is one of dissatisfaction and the conviction that the democratic process is far from succeeding. The Slovaks seem to be the most pessimistic, although no one is laughing in Hungary and Bulgaria either - and even less in the countries of the former Soviet Union. On the other hand, the optimism displayed by the Albanians seems staggering; it can be explained by the fact that even the slightest improvement in their situation seems miraculous to them, and tinged with the colours of hope. Thus 72% of them are convinced that their country is now headed in the right direction. This confidence is shared by the Czechs, although to a smaller extent (59%), and by the Estonians (51%). In the Ukraine, however, only 12% of the inhabitants are optimistic, and in Lithuania and Hungary just 19%.

The Albanians are still in the lead when asked if they feel that their financial situation has improved in the last 12 months: 60% of them feel it has, while elsewhere the range is between the Estonians, with 23%, and the Ukrainians, at 4%. Feelings are much the same as regards the future: 59% of Albanians believe that things will be even better, while all the others seem either far more sceptical or frankly without hope, like the Ukrainians once more, only 11% of whom think they can see the light at the end of the tunnel.

The market economy: its the mixture as before. 71% of Albanians believe in it, but the Ukrainians and Russians (31%) and Armenians (24%) are in full revolt against it. But the feeling is not shared in most of the countries which are beneficiaries of the PHARE programme, launched by the European Union to help Albania, Bulgaria, the Czech republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia. In none of these countries is there a majority which is opposed to a market economy, with the exception of Slovakia. It is true that the Slovenes and Lithuanians appear divided, with 41% for and 39% against.

As for the European Union, its image has become somewhat tarnished in recent times. Leaving the Albanians yet again to one side, given that 71% of them view it favourably, the EU has lost ground almost everywhere else; it is in free fall in Slovenia, for example, where the proportion of those in favour of it has fallen by 15% in a year. Armenia is an exception, with a surge of those in favour of 16%. The image of the European Union remains positive on the whole, but by a whisker. This is not to say that our Central and East European neighbours underestimate its importance. On the contrary, the EU appears increasingly as a benchmark for the future of their countries, well ahead of the United States. The number of those who believe in the role of the United States has shrunk by one-third in 12 months. The notion of Russia's importance is gaining ground, on the other hand, in roughly the same proportion as that of the European Union. The Russians, meanwhile, are looking to the United States (along with the Macedonians from the former Yugoslavia).

The Russians, in addition, are afraid: afraid that their country will once again become a dictatorship, afraid that human rights will be increasingly violated (a feeling shared by the majority of people in nearly all Central and East European countries), afraid that their economic situation will continue to deteriorate, afraid that their country will take the wrong road. And fear only too often is a bad adviser.

LOCAL ELECTIONS: Proposal on the right to vote and stand for election

The Commission proposes that each European citizen be entitled to vote and stand for election in the Member State he lives in.

The European Commission has submitted a draft directive dealing with voting conditions and the right to be a candidate at local elections. The aim is to enable nationals of all Member States to vote and stand for election in another Member State than their own, on the same terms as its nationals, as from 1 January 1996.

Some 5 million European citizens currently live in the Member State of which they are not nationals. Roughly 4 million of them do not have the right to vote or stand for election in their host country*. At present only Ireland allows all foreign residents to vote and stand for election on the same conditions as its own nationals, while the Netherlands and Denmark apply residential qualifications.

... / ...

In all other EU countries, nationals of other Member States are totally excluded from taking part in local elections.

The directive now proposed by the Commission is aimed at ending this discrimination against nationals of other Member States. It stipulates that EU countries will have to grant the right to vote and stand for election to nationals of other Member States on the same terms as those laid down for their own nationals. They nevertheless would retain the possibility of reserving certain key offices - such as that of mayor or deputy mayor - for their own nationals. The directive also stipulates that Member States in which nationals of other EU countries exceed 20% of the population can set certain conditions as regards the right to vote and stand for local elections. At present only Luxembourg finds itself in this situation.

The fact is that more than 105,000 nationals of other Member States live in Luxembourg, accounting for more than one-fourth of the country's total population. Nationals of other EU countries represent some 29% of the total number of voters in Luxembourg, as compared to 0.3% to 6% on average in the other Member States. Luxembourg therefore could derogate from the general principle of non-discrimination, and set specific residential qualifications for nationals of other EU countries. However, residential requirements for the right to vote could not exceed six years, which is the duration of a local government mandate. The requirements for the right to stand for election could not exceed 12 years.

This directive should come into force as from 1 January 1996, but it must first receive the unanimous backing of all 12 EU countries.

* More than one million Italians, 840,000 Portuguese, 630,000 Irish, 470,000 Spaniards, 400,000 Britons, 360,000 Greeks, 300,000 French, 290,000 Germans, 240,000 Dutch, 130,000 Belgians, 40,000 Danes and 11,000 Luxemburgers live in another EU country, where they work, pay taxes and generally take part in economic and social life - but not in the management of local affairs.

ENVIRONMENT: A mountain of rubbish

But the European Union produces less than half the amount of rubbish than the U.S.

Rubbish, or municipal waste to be exact, is evidence of economic dynamism - or rather of a society based on waste. The European Union generates some 350 kg. per person on average each year, with a peak of 500 kg. in the Netherlands and 480 kg. in Denmark - and a trough of 300 kg. in Greece and 260 kg. in Portugal.

Even so, the EU is well behind the United States, with its 720 kg. per person per year, and behind even Japan (410 kg.). In Europe, the Finns produce the most waste, with 620 kg. They are followed by the Norwegians (470 kg.) and the Hungarians (460 kg.), while the Czechs can manage no more than 250 kg., the lowest figure for the continent.

Fortunately waste is now beginning to be recycled almost everywhere in the European Union. Thus some 40% of waste paper is currently being recycled - rising to 50% in Spain and the Netherlands for paper and cardboard. Ireland, however, manages to recycle less than 10% of its waste paper. When it comes to glass, Belgium, Denmark and the Netherlands are in the lead, with 50%. This is much better than in the United States, where only 30% of waste paper and cardboard and just 20% of glass is recycled.

SOCIAL PROTECTION: Europe is looking for the ideal system

The Commission points to important differences in the level of protection offered European citizens by the various Member States.

The challenges facing Member States as regards social protection are much the same: an ageing population, rising unemployment, changes in the make-up of families and marginalization and poverty. These challenges, and the ways in which Member States are meeting them, are analyzed in a survey just published by the European Commission. The survey suggests there are major differences between the Member States.

The widest disparities are at the level of family allowances. For every young person under the age of 20, the amount received represented less than 1% of GDP per person in Spain, as compared to over 12% in Denmark. Unemployment benefits amount, on average, to 70% to 80% of GDP per person in Denmark, Belgium and the Netherlands, as compared to approximately 10% in Greece and just over 20% in Britain and Portugal.

In the event of disability or illness, salaries are paid in full in Belgium, Luxembourg, Germany and Greece. But the proportion falls to one-half in Italy and to one-third in Britain and Ireland. Finally, an adult who is fit for work but finds himself penniless for one reason or another, cannot claim even a basic income in Greece and Portugal.

These disparities are due to the fact that social security systems have not yet reached maturity in the countries of southern Europe, where traditions differ as do the ways in which questions of organization and financing are handled. In 1992 the Twelve decided that the time had come for them to look together for solutions to their social protection problems, and that it was necessary, to this end, to seek convergence as regards objectives and policies. By highlighting the extent of the disparities, the survey should contribute to a relaunch of the debate within the EU Council of Ministers. There can be no question, as the Commission sees it, of asking Member States to harmonize their social protection systems. It is essential, however, that they make every effort to offer every European citizen the best protection possible.

ENVIRONMENT: The safety of bathers

European legislation on bathing waters has enabled a net improvement in their quality since 1975.

The 1975 directive, or European law, on bathing waters has played a very important role in their improvement. It has achieved this not only because of the very precise criteria it lays down but also by virtue of the information procedure it provides for, which requires the publication of an annual report. During the course of the last 10 years the number of bathing areas which have been monitored has doubled; Community legislation now applies to more than 16,000 areas within the European Union.

Fortified by its experience and its successes, the European Commission, on a proposal from the environment commissioner, Yannis Paleokrassas, is of the view that it is time that the directive was revised and the existing texts simplified, in order to consolidate and adapt them, to take account of scientific and technical progress - without reducing the level of protection for public health and the environment.

The new text sets out the conditions in which Member States must impose a ban on bathing, should excessive pollution represent a threat to public health. Naturally there is nothing to prevent Member States from introducing standards which are more strict than those contained in Community legislation. Among the new features of the draft directive is one which requires municipalities to provide information on (1) the quality of their bathing waters and (2) the measures they plan to take, or have already taken, in the event of pollution. The aim of the new law is to reach a standard of "excellence" for bathing waters in the EU. In presenting his proposal to his fellow commissioners, Mr. Paleokrassas pointed out that it represents a marked improvement over existing legislation in that it maintains strict requirements for the health of citizens, even while providing for simpler procedures and better information and limiting the costs to Member States. "It is an example of a directive which improves with time, profiting from the experience acquired by the Member States and by keeping pace with technical progress".

CONSUMERS: Be careful with cross-border alcohol and tobacco

The European Commission points out that there are limits to what you can bring home from your travels for you own use.

The cross-border purchases of alcoholic beverages and tobacco which Europeans can make since 1 January 1993 are meant for travellers - i.e. individuals who bring home wine and cigarettes for their own use. The point was made by the European tax commissioner, Mrs. Christiane Scrivener, at a press conference in early March. She stressed that those who ask relatives, friends or middlemen to bring them alcoholic beverages or cigarettes from another EU country, could find themselves in trouble with their own tax authorities.

When British consumers recently placed orders for wine with middlemen who get their supplies from France, where the taxes on wine are lower, the British government took the view - shared by Mrs. Scrivener - that fraud had been committed. The Commissioner noted that if European legislation in this area was not sufficiently clear, the Commission would do the needful.

REGIONAL AID: ECU 600 million for rundown neighbourhoods

A new programme covering cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants.

Some 80% of the population of the European Union lives in cities, roughly 350 of which have more than 100,000 inhabitants. Around 50 of them should receive "European funds" earmarked for helping areas in difficulty, thanks to an action launched at the beginning of March by the European Commission and baptized URBAN.

The new programme will run from 1994 to 1999 and have a budget totalling ECU 600m.*. ECU 400m. of this will be earmarked for cities located in the most disadvantages regions of the European Union, while the remaining ECU 200m. will be spent on regions in industrial decline. URBAN will help rundown neighbourhoods with high levels of unemployment and an absence of social infrastructure.

Since 1990 the European Regional Development Fund has spent ECU 101m. on 32 development projects in as many EU cities.

* 1 ECU = UK£0.76 or IR£0.79.

ECONOMY: 1993 was the worst year for industry since 1975 ...
... but there were signs of recovery by the end of that gloomy year.

With a fall in output of 3.5%, 1993 was the worst year for industry since 1975, when the first oil crisis, touched off by the Arab-Israeli conflict, saw the European economy brought to a standstill and production dropped by as much as 6.8%.

Nearly all 12 EU countries were affected by last year's fall, according to Eurostat, the EU's statistical office. Only Britain and Ireland recorded a rise in output; elsewhere production fell - in Germany (West) by a record 7.5%.

Japanese industrial production fell by 4.1%, as compared to the 3.5% fall recorded in the 12-nation EU. The United States, however, saw production rise by 4.2%.

Even so, recovery was discernible in the EU at the end of last year. Industrial production rose by 0.5% between the months of September to November, as compared to the previous three months, after having fallen during the previous 3-monthly periods.

INFLATION: Up slightly in January, as compared to December ...
... but down in relation to January 1993.

Prices in the 12-nation European Union rose in January by 3.4% on an annual basis, as compared to the 3.3% recorded in December, according to Eurostat, the EU's statistical office. However, the annual rate of inflation stood at 3.6% in January 1993, and has oscillated between 3.2% and 3.6% since then.

This January it was Ireland which recorded the lowest rate of inflation; with 1.5% it was ahead of Denmark (1.8%), France (2.2%), Belgium and the Netherlands (2.4%) were next, followed by Britain and Luxembourg (2.5%). Countries above the European average were Germany (West: 3.5%), Italy (4.4%), Spain (5%), Portugal (6.4%) and, finally, Greece (11.1%).