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TRADE: Protectionist hara-kiri?

Should margarine be sold in cubes or cones? A silly question? Not for the manufacturers or ultimately the consumers!

The European Court of Justice has just condemned Belgium for blocking trade because it only allows the sale of margarine if it is packed in cubes. The legislation blocks the entry of foreign margarine, especially margarine from Germany which is packaged in cones. As the Belgian authorities see it, the cube shape is part of a consumer tradition and prevents any confusion with butter.

This is not an isolated case. Examples of similar subtle forms of "protectionism" are to be found in almost every Community Member State.

Did you know, for instance, that apple or malt vinegar cannot enter Italy because only wine vinegar is recognized south of the Alps? All kinds of historical reasons are raised to justify the ban on imports of foreign vinegar, imposed by Italy.

Then there is the German legislation dating back to ... wait for it, 1516 - which bans the sale of any beer not made exclusively from malt or barley. This stops the sale of English, Danish and Alsatian beer in Germany, and, although condemned as completely illegal by the European Community is still applied.

Did you know that "speculoos", the rather delicious Belgian biscuits, cannot be sold in the Netherlands because their cinnamon content is considered too high - and could endanger the health of the Dutch?

The famous "Dijon Cassis" is also still not sold in Germany because its alcohol content does not conform to German standards. The European Court of Justice has condemned Germany for this barrier, but the country is yet to change its rules.

There are hundreds of other examples of similar protectionism, justified by reference to ancient laws, health of citizens, or consumer protection. These pretexts are, at first glance, perfectly legitimate and even admirable, but a closer look reveals a more dangerous trend towards protectionism... or rather "neo-protectionism" of a specifically "European" nature.

One might well ask why this is so. Well, because the EC Treaties ban all traditional forms of protectionism such as tariff barriers and quotas. So Community Member States look for other ways, and using their imagination, succeed in avoiding Community regulations and achieving their goal: the

protection of a specific product or a threatened sector.

The European Commission is now getting four times as many complaints against trade barriers than in the past; 400 currently compared to 50 in the 1970s. Of these 400, 110 are currently being investigated by the European Commission and the European Court of Justice. For the Commission which enforces Community rules, the scenario is always the same. Firstly, indications that the sales of a particular product on a market are being slowed down. Secondly, the argument used is always legitimate. Thirdly, the authority responsible for the ban tells the Commission that identical treatment is meted out to national products and foreign products. Final stage: a closer look shows that the measure is designed to stop imports indirectly.

What kinds of measures are being used? Almost everything, including bureaucratic formalities, red tape, papers to fill in, over-zealous customs officers, fines ... the states are particularly good at drawing up very complicated lists of norms and standards, which must be respected by foreign exporters and which vary from country to country.

The European Commission is also suspicious of slogans used to encourage consumption of national goods such as "Buy British" or "Reconquest of the national market".

The European Commission is increasingly concerned by the increase in such neo-protectionist measures. Warnings have been given by a number of European Commissioners including Karl-Heinz Narjes and Frans Andriessen.

The Commission's stance is clear. It is based on two decisions taken by the Court: the first deals with Italian vinegar and the second with "Dijon Cassis". It stipulates that any product sold and consumed in one Community Member State should be allowed into other Member States, unless specific health reasons can be invoked. So, if apple vinegar and "Dijon Cassis" don't kill people or at least make them extremely sick, they have to be let in!

SOCIETY: Happy families?

Traditional values and the makeup of the European family are changing. There are currently two main types of households in the European Community: on the one hand, those in more developed secular countries, such as Great Britain, the Federal Republic of Germany and France, and on the other, those in the predominantly agricultural and Catholic systems, such as Italy and Ireland. The Benelux countries are somewhere in the middle and Denmark seems to have developed an entirely different concept of "household". This is according to a study entitled "Economic and Social Characteristics of Households in the Member States of the European Community" conducted during the 1970s, whose results have just been published by Eurostat.

To begin with the modern concept of "a household" is no longer synonymous with "a family" in the strictest sense. Family links are less and less the determining element in a household and researchers have now adopted the concept of cohabitation as the main criterion. A household consists of a group of people living under the same roof, but can also be composed of only one person. The "head of the household" -- since there has to be one for purposes of the study -- is defined as the person who identifies himself or herself as such in the surveys, frequently the one who pays the rent and the person who exercises the most authority. In general, it still applies largely to the male members of a household.

One of the most noticeable results of the survey was the striking reduction in the size of European households. They now tend to consist of two to three people in the Federal Republic of Germany, France, Great Britain and Belgium, but in Italy and Ireland they remain larger. Generally, the largest households are still found in the agricultural sector.

The number of people working has also changed. More than 54 percent of Irish and nearly 50 percent of Italian households have only one working member. On the other hand, in France, and the United Kingdom, in about 30 percent of households, two people work. In between 20 and 25 percent of European households nobody works. Normally they are unemployed young people or pensioners. A particularly large number of young people live alone in the Netherlands and in the Federal Republic of Germany, showing that economics appears to be less and less of a reason for living at home. In the Community as a whole, with the exception of Ireland, there are twice as many women living alone as there are men. In the Eurostat study, a woman was only considered as the head of the household when she was living alone.

SOCIAL: Social security systems under review

Until the recession Europeans tended to take things like old age pensions, the dole, family allowances and subsidized health care for granted. But with several European Community countries currently cutting government spending, debate has been growing between politicians of right and left as to how much should be spent on social security benefits and where the money should go.

A discussion paper outlining existing social security systems in Europe, the problems that they face in the current economic climate and possible areas for their reform, has now been released by the European Commission in Brussels.

Among its priorities, the Commission wants to see a simplification of social security systems throughout Europe to make them cheaper to run and easier to use. Other priority needs it lists include special attention to be given to how benefits are assessed and closer examination of the sort of things that health spending is going towards.

The paper also raises a number of hitherto unanswered questions about existing systems, including: Should they be more flexible? How is it that in some Community countries women are still discriminated against in terms of benefits? What could be done to clarify existing social security laws and administration? What can be done about the misuse, wastage and overlapping of some benefits? Could systems be made fairer by "making everyone contribute to them according to their means?". And should we think of social security purely in terms of increased cash benefits, rather than increased services in kind, such as free food, heating, transport, etc.?

Existing European social security systems vary widely and scope for Community action in the field is therefore limited. The United Kingdom, Denmark and the Netherlands all operate roughly similar unified state schemes, which cover the whole population for unemployment, health and family benefits and give employees certain advantages over the self-employed. Belgium has two main systems, one for employees and another for the self-employed. Germany, France, Greece, Italy and Luxembourg all operate a wide range of schemes and in Ireland national insurance is only compulsory for employees. National health services only operate in the United Kingdom, Italy and Denmark. Systems are also financed very differently. In Denmark, Ireland and the United Kingdom, most of the money comes from taxes, whereas in Italy and France, most of it comes from employers contributions. As a proportion of GDP, spending ranges from 30.7 percent in the Netherlands to 21.4 percent in Britain.

EXTERNAL RELATIONS: New links with Brazil

Brazil, the largest country in Latin America and the fifth largest country in the world, is ready to step up its trade and economic ties with the European Community.

Brazil and the Community have been linked to each other through a cooperation agreement since 1974. This arrangement has now been replaced by a more extensive Brazil - Community pact which deals with trade, industrial development and cooperation in the technology and science sectors. The new agreement entered into force in October this year, just one month before Wilhelm Haferkamp, the Commissioner for External Relations went to Brasilia for official discussions with leading Brazilian officials, including the country's President, Mr. Figueiredo, and the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr. Guerrero.

While in Brazil, Mr. Haferkamp signed the first instalment worth \$75 million of a \$600 million loan to the Carajas iron-ore project decided recently by the European Coal and Steel Community.

The Carajas project is located in the heart of Amazonia, in an area well known for its mineral resources. By financing a part of the iron-ore development fund, the Community is in fact ensuring its future supplies of iron ore for the Community's steel industry. The Member States are leading investors in Brazil representing about 30 percent of all foreign investments in that country.

Foreign capital plays a major role in Brazil's economic development and enjoys the same guarantees as Brazilian private capital against nationalisation and other risks.

Trade is another major area where Brazil and the Community have been cooperating for some years. Brazil is the Community's largest export market in Latin America, and in turn, the Community provides Brazil with its major export outlet.

The Community's major exports to Brazil include machinery and transport equipment. Main Brazilian exports to the Community cover soya cakes, iron ore, coffee, tobacco, timber, cocoa and cotton.

These exports have been growing over the years, but just recently, Brazil also increased its sales of industrial goods to the Community.

What is needed now, according to Commissioner Wilhelm Haferkamp, is closer cooperation between economic operators. The Community is ready to back up such cooperation through trade promotion and sectoral conferences, said the Commissioner.

PARLIAMENT: Soviet Union accused

"A cold and calculated slow genocide", is how the Political Committee of the European Parliament has described the actions of the Soviet Union in the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania since 1940, when the Soviet occupation began under the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, signed by Stalin and Hitler.

"In an era of world-wide decolonisation, the USSR is the last major colonial power on earth", states the report, prepared by German Christian Democrat MEP Otto Habsburg. The Soviet Union has for the past 42 years "deprived these three populations of their national identity and exploited their natural resources", which include bituminous tars and phosphorite, two important raw materials.

"There is a general sentiment of despair among the population", states the report. It recalls the declaration made in April 1979 and signed by 45 Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians, asking the United Nations to recognise the rights of the Baltic States to self-determination and independence and urging a referendum on this issue.

The report says that "a cold and calculated slow genocide" by the USSR is in flagrant contradiction with the principles of the final act of the Helsinki Declaration on Security and Cooperation in Europe, guaranteeing the rights of peoples to self-determination, and with the United Nations charter. The Baltic States are part of Europe, the report continues, and Europe therefore cannot remain indifferent to the fate of fellow Europeans.

The Political Committee of the Parliament therefore wants the Foreign Ministers of the European Community, when discussing political cooperation, to adopt a joint position on the issue. It also proposes that "the problem of the Baltic States" be submitted to the Special Decolonisation Committee of the United Nations. How could the Soviet Union oppose such a procedure since it has introduced similar requests itself on other occasions? The principle of decolonisation is indivisible and "what is right for Africa is also right for Europe", concludes the report.

AGRICULTURE: Hell is other people!

If you think a chicken is a harmless, inoffensive creature, you'd better think again. The farmyard can be the scene of bloody conflicts. It begins with a few relatively harmless pecks and the combatants can end up half-devouring each other. The removal of chickens' beaks is the only solution to the problem and farmers often resort to it in order to prevent the development of aggressive behaviour in chickens, which can lead to outright cannibalism.

Because this type of operation can be painful to the birds, Roland Boyes, a British Socialist member of the European Parliament who is worried about the issue, feels the European Commission should study the problem.

But European Agriculture Commissioner Poul Dalsager says that beak removal represents more advantages than disadvantages for the animals. But the operation has to be performed when the bird is still relatively young, he says. Cauterizing also ensures proper healing and prevents infection. The European Commission says that animals raised on farms are protected under guidelines provided by a European Convention.

In any case, up to now, no alternative has been found to improve the behaviour of European chickens. It's certainly not for the lack of trying to make their lives a little more tolerable by improving their environment by enlarging their living space in their hatcheries and by improving the amount of air and lighting they get. Unfortunately, Community Social Security systems are currently too stretched to use psychiatrists to ease barnyard anxieties.

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