



The transport challenge

by Neil Kinnock, Member of the European Commission

Just as in the last century the creation of national single markets required compatible transport systems and common rules, so in our generation a growing international single market needs much the same. That, indeed, is the basis of the case for the Trans-European Network strategy.

The case for Trans-European Networks

If we are really serious about building a wider Europe, integrating our economies and increasing competitiveness, the dislocations that came from inadequate infrastructure and fragmented administration must be overcome. Part of the answer must come, of course, from cooperation and Community legislation that is effectively enforced. Part must come from the use of compatible technology and common gauges, whether in the improvement of air traffic management or in the integration of rail systems. And part — a large part — of the answer must come from investment in new infrastructure for land, water and air transport.

That need for finance poses special difficulties. National budgets are stretched, the restraints on borrowing are particularly tight as Member States strive to meet the Maastricht criteria, and — in this century at least — there has been little use of private capital for public infrastructure development.

Given those realities, it would be easy to accept that major infrastructure projects will be shelved for a couple of decades. The trouble is that Europe simply cannot afford that acquiescence. Congestion is already epidemic. On present trends traffic volumes will double in the next 15 to 20 years. Water and rail transport are underutilized. Civil aviation delays are increasing again. Road and rail connections into Eastern Europe are almost prehistoric.

Because of all that, I will continue to argue for the energetic pursuit of the transport network priorities which have been nominated by the Member States. In making the argument for Trans-European Networks (TENs) it would help if business organizations — many of which have been very supportive — could make their voices heard more clearly.

The need to mobilize market forces

TENs will help reduce transport times and costs. The investment involved will create new business as well as stimulate research and innovation. The creation and operation of some infrastructures will also provide the basis for permanent new enterprises and new jobs. Partly because of those considerations, in the Commission we are making efforts to foster partnership between the public and private sectors. While these efforts are under way we are, of course, pursuing other initiatives to try to reduce transport pressures, to spread the passenger and freight traffic load and to restrain the costs of transport for business and for society in general.

In all of our publications and initiatives in transport we are constantly emphasizing the need to mobilize market forces in all modes in order to increase efficiency and commercial operation and we argue that, rather than contradicting essential public service obligations, this can often strengthen the standards of service. There has to be reasonable balance in the changes which are essential in the general context of liberalization in the single market.

Clearly the challenges are complex and formidable, and they will only be met properly if Member States, people and businesses recognize the basic truth about the Union, which is that the product of the whole will be much greater than the sum of the parts if they work together. However, the patent need to restrain costs, to increase competitiveness, to decongest the centre and stimulate the peripheries, to protect the environment and to generate sustainable growth and employment will increasingly bring commitment to efficient transport systems. In making those efforts, the constructive engagement of business is vital.

■ A polyglot information society

In the next three years, the European Union will fund activities to promote the use of all its languages in electronic communications. On 8 October, the Council of the Union approved a budget of ECU 15 000 000 (1 ecu = UK£ 0.80 or IRL 0.79) for this programme. The aim is twofold: on the one hand to tell people about multilingual information services and how to use them, and on the other hand to promote the use of telematics for translation and interpretation. In a 15-member Union with 11 official languages, it is important to reduce the cost of transferring information from one language to another by using the most appropriate systems and standards. The programme also aims to facilitate access to the information society at affordable costs for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). More generally, it also seeks to promote linguistic diversity and 'language industries' in a Union where many electronic information services are available in English only.

■ Government subsidies for urban renewal

To boost jobs in particularly depressed urban areas, the European Commission adopted a set of rules on 2 October allowing Member Governments to subsidize companies seeking to set up new activities there or to maintain existing ones. Under the EU's founding treaty, State aid of this kind is normally forbidden, but national programmes which follow criteria fixed by the Commission will be exempted from the ban. Companies benefiting from government aid must have a local vocation and must be involved in supplying services to their community. These could include retail shops, repairing household appliances, the building trade, selling and repairing cars, running hotels, restaurants and taxi services, health care and social work, as well as collective and individual services and home help activities. At least 20% of the jobs created must be reserved for people who live locally, with priority going to young people without work or professional training, and to women. These criteria, which will remain in force for five years, are based on those used by the Commission when it authorized the French 'Pact for urban renewal' in March 1996. According to the Commission, aid granted under the programme could, over time, benefit about 1% of the population in each Member State of the Union.

■ A new 'law' for posted workers

Three years from now at the latest, workers posted by their companies to work in another EU country on the basis of a service contract will have the right to the salaries and working conditions applicable in the host country. This is the fundamental principle of a directive which was formally adopted by the Council of the Union on 24 September. In order to apply to posted workers, the conditions in force in host countries must be included in the text of published regulations. The only exception is the building industry where, in addition, the conditions will be included in collective agreements and other general provisions. The building sector is the one in which posted workers are most frequently used. The host country's minimum wage will apply to workers posted there for a minimum stay of at least one month. For shorter work periods each of the 15 EU governments will be free to decide whether the minimum wage should apply or not. Local working conditions apply in principle to all posted workers, irrespective of the length of their stay. These conditions include the minimum duration of paid holidays, the right of men and women to equal pay and minimum standards for safety, health and hygiene. They also cover maximum working time, rest periods

and measures in favour of pregnant women and nursing mothers as well as children and young people.

□ IN BRIEF

The Council of the Union reached agreement on 27 September on a common system of **licensing for telecommunications services** to apply once the sector is fully liberalized in 1998. The system is part of a draft directive which provides for a one-stop shop and a European licensing committee. The aim is to facilitate the entry of new players into the market.¹

On 3 October, the Council of the Union instructed the European Commission to open negotiations with **10 central and eastern European countries** to get them to open their **air transport** markets to competition. The countries concerned — Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia — must gradually adopt EU rules, particularly its safety norms.

A Member State of the European Union has the right to tax the notional interest payments saved by a company which has benefited from an interest-free loan. In a case where the **interest-free loan** is granted to a subsidiary by its parent company, the latter can be taxed on the theoretical interest payments it would be entitled to receive on such a loan. Decisions in this area remain the responsibility of national authorities. This is how the European Court of Justice interpreted the directive on the taxation of capital accretion in a ruling on 26 September.

The **extradition from one EU country to another** of persons suspected of involvement in serious crimes will be easier in future as a result of a convention signed by the 15 Member States on 27 September. The convention rejects politically-motivated crime as a valid reason for refusing extradition. It also allows EU countries to extradite their own nationals. The convention will come into force once it has been ratified by national parliaments.

The introduction of compatible **personal communications services by satellite** came a step nearer on 27 September when the Council of the Union approved a decision¹ whereby transmission frequencies will be harmonized by the European Conference of Postal and Telecommunications Administrations (CEPT). If the CEPT, which includes the EU and most other European countries, fails to act rapidly, the Union will decide for itself. In addition, the Member States and the Commission approved on 10 October the principle of a European strategy for satellite communications.

According to the EU treaty, a Member State cannot demand from a company based in another Union country a **deposit to cover legal costs** if it does not require such a payment from companies and associations set up within its own territory. This was the conclusion of the European Court of Justice on 26 September in a case where a British company was taking action against a Swedish company before a Swedish court.

Involvement in **corrupt dealings with national or European public servants** or senior magistrates will soon be a criminal offence in all countries of the European Union. All 15 EU States must provide for penal sanctions even in a case which involves attempts to corrupt officials in another member country. This is the aim of a protocol signed by the Member States on 27 September, which supplements an earlier convention on the fight against fraud signed last year. The protocol will come into effect once ratified by all EU countries.

A lawyer who is **exempted from paying VAT** in his own country cannot claim the reimbursement of VAT paid in a country where he is not established or which does not grant exoneration to lawyers. This was the ruling handed down by the European Court of Justice on 26 September in a case between the Dutch fiscal authorities and a Belgian lawyer who leased a car in the Netherlands for his use in Belgium.

INITIATIVES

● Finland joins the ERM

The Finnish government announced on 12 October its decision to bring the Finnish markka into the exchange rate mechanism of the European Monetary System (EMS) with effect from 14 October. Announcing the decision, Prime Minister Paavo Lipponen said he wanted to 'make sure that Finland fulfilled all the criteria' set by the Maastricht treaty for joining the single currency. On 12 October, EU finance ministers and central bank governors fixed the exchange rate for the Finnish markka against the ecu and against the other currencies in the

¹ Decision to be taken jointly by the Council of the Union and the European Parliament.

THE EUROPEAN FOUNDATION FOR THE IMPROVEMENT OF LIVING AND WORKING CONDITIONS

Founded by the Council of Ministers in 1975, the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions is celebrating its 21st birthday this year. An autonomous body providing advice and information to the European Union institutions and Member States, the Foundation aims to contribute to the planning and establishment of better living and working conditions through action designed to increase and disseminate knowledge likely to assist this development.

Over the past two decades, the work of the Foundation's international staff has aimed to establish it as a centre of excellence in its field. This work includes projects on employment, the information society and the impact of technological change on working and living conditions, social cohesion, migrants, racism, the work environment, working time, information and consultation of workers, flexibility and work organization, telework, equality of opportunity for men and women, disablement and older people — all issues relevant to current developments in European Union social policy.

The current programme of work takes account of relevant trends which impinge on everyday life. Priority issues are identified by the Foundation's Administrative Board, which represents employers, trade unions and national governments of the Member States of the EU and the European Commission. Projects are contracted out to experts and specialists across Europe under the management of Foundation staff in Dublin, Ireland and are subject to continuous evaluation by the Administrative Board. These features of independent research across Europe, a medium- and long-term perspective and prioritization of issues by the social partners and governments of the Member States distinguish the Foundation's contribution to the policy-formulation process of the EU.

The White Paper on European social policy of 1994 stated that 'the Foundation has an important role to play in analysing the key developments and factors of change concerning living and working conditions in the Union' and added that it 'can play an essential role in the dissemination of information and exchanges of experience'.

The Foundation has identified three goals to which it can make a significant contribution: to improve the health and well-being of European workers and citizens; to increase economic and social cohesion; to

maintain the move towards a balanced and integrated development of social, economic and environmental aspects.

The Foundation's key principles, underpinning and supporting its work are:

- an integrated approach to living and working conditions, and the environment;
- the effective involvement and participation of relevant parties;
- the need for equality of opportunity and treatment;
- consideration for regional, urban and rural disparities;
- concern for economic effectiveness.

The European Commission's Medium-Term Social Policy Action Programme 1995-97 refers to the Foundation's role in establishing better social dialogue, indicating that the Foundation will 'assist the exchange and transfer of experience' and 'support the debate on the social and societal implications for the information society'. This document also defined a new departure for the Foundation: the establishment of a European Industrial Relations Observatory. The fundamental aim of this undertaking is to provide authoritative and up-to-date information on industrial relations, covering the most significant events and issues in collective bargaining, consultation and social dialogue in the Member States.

As small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) form such a significant group in the EU, employing 70% of the private sector workforce, it is fitting that the Foundation's programme takes them into account across the broad scope of its programme. Specific projects recognize the unique role of SMEs as employers and economics players, in terms of health and safety, the move towards the information society, and protection of the environment.

Occupational health and safety

Annually in the EU around 8 000 people are killed in occupational accidents, while as many as 10 million suffer injury or disease. Over 30% of workers believe their health and safety to be at risk. Compensation payments are estimated at ECU 20 000 million. The Foundation's international working group on economic incentives is exploring systems that make health and safety measures financially worthwhile for

employers. Insurance-based incentives, administered through State agencies or private insurers, are the most common type of scheme to date. Such incentives can be directly targeted at making improvements in the workplace, and unlike legislation, incentives can be self-targeting, self-enforcing and of positive benefit to companies.

SMEs are a particular concern, not only because they form such a large percentage of European enterprises, but also because simple aggregated accident statistics are invalid as an index of risk where accidents are infrequent. If economic incentives are based on accident statistics, SMEs might suffer huge variations in incentive levels as a result of only one or two accidents. Therefore, protecting SMEs must be a major consideration in the design of an incentive scheme. Details of the scheme are available in *An innovative economic incentive model for the improvement of the working environment in Europe* (all Community languages ISBN 92-827-4912-6).

The thematic group on health and safety has recognized stress as a major threat to modern organizations. Successful prevention of stress requires a systematic approach and worker involvement in all stages. Foundation publications on stress help to identify and remedy areas of stress in the workplace, with questionnaires and strategies that pay special attention to the problems and structures of SMEs.

Sustainable development

Employment in Europe 1995, COM (95)381 notes that unemployment in the European Union now affects almost 11% of the workforce. In a separate report on sustainability, the European Environment Agency concluded that action taken in the European Union to date will not lead to full integration of environmental considerations into economic sectors, or to sustainable development. Any consequential action to intensify environmental policy would affect the economy and hence employment. This is the motivation for Foundation work examining whether and in what circumstances the impact of environmental policies on employment is positive or negative.

Three separate studies focus on SMEs in the manufacturing sector in different regions of the European Union. The sectors involved are food processing, iron foundries (together with automotive parts), and ceramic tiles. The research seeks to relate differences in employment and competitiveness to specific national or regional differences in environmental, regulatory and other (e.g. cultural) pressures. Preliminary findings, *inter alia*, suggest that firms adopting environmentally best practices are those likely to survive and hence maintain employment.

The information society

One of the most important challenges — and potential opportunities — to face SMEs has been the revolution in information technology. Developments such as computer networking, videoconferencing, faxes and computer-aided design (CAD), have all been seized on by many SMEs.

The increased ease of communication allowed by information technology has rendered location less relevant. Whereas traditionally suppliers to large manufacturing companies clustered about them, this is no longer necessary. There has been increased interaction between SMEs and large manufacturers in terms of joint design and development of products to meet the clients' specifications and cost requirements.

These stable relationships may curtail competition but ultimately this development should reduce costs and improve quality, providing a better product to the consumer.

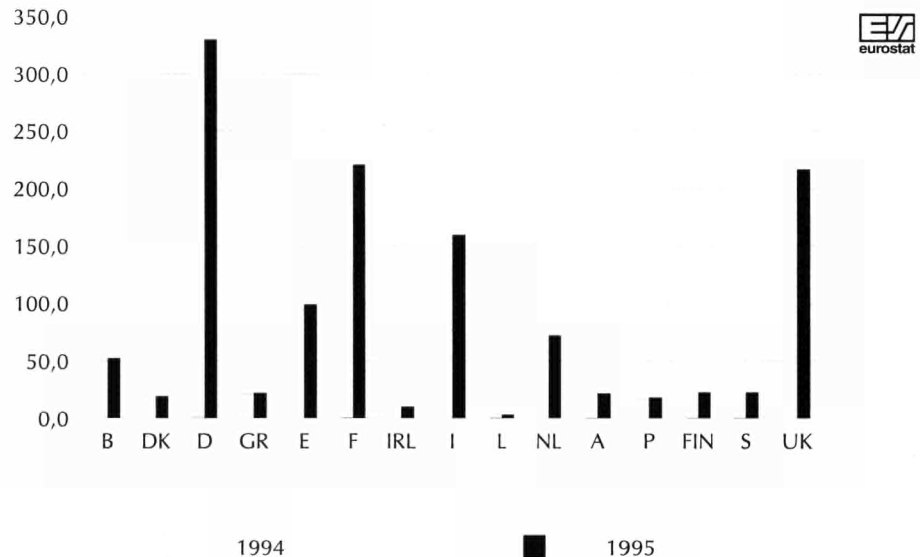
The real revolution, however, has been in service industries. 'Virtual firms' are companies that do not exist in the traditional sense of company law. They are, rather, cooperation partnerships between SMEs which combine forces on a project-to-project basis. Because they do not incur further administrative or financial overheads, they can compete with established firms. Often such companies are composed of one-person expert firms. These individuals need never meet, and can work from different countries — assuming a common language. Although the degree of flexibility is wholly new, this principle has always existed in the construction industry, with subcontractors coming together to work on a project. The major difference is that whereas subcontractors met physically on site, micro-firms can discuss design plans together through videoconferencing. The working paper *Flexispace/mobility of work: a problem study on the future of spatially flexible forms of work* is available from the Foundation in English and German. *In addition to a comprehensive programme of research and analysis, the Foundation regularly publishes reports, booklets and newsletters, organizes conferences and exhibitions, welcomes visitors and responds to enquiries. The Foundation's work is in the public domain and available to all interested parties. Its publications are available from the Office for Official Publications, 2 rue Mercier, L-2985 Luxembourg. Further information is available from the Information Centre, European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, Wyattville Road, Loughlinstown, Co. Dublin, Ireland. Tel.: + 353 1 204 3100, Fax: + 353 1 282 6456, E-mail: postmaster@eurofound.ie. Internet: <http://www.cec.lu/en/agencies.html>*

Energy economy of the European Union in 1995

Total gross domestic energy consumption in the European Union (EUR 15) was 308.4 million toe, an increase of 1.7% over 1994

Of the five major energy consumers in 1995, the highest increases in consumption were recorded in Spain (+5.8%), in Italy (+4.8%) and in France (+2.9%). There was a slight drop in Germany (-0.7%) while consumption remained relatively stable in the United Kingdom (-0.1%). Among the other Member States, consumption also increased in Belgium, Greece, the Netherlands and Portugal.

Trend in gross domestic energy consumption (million toe¹)



Gross domestic energy consumption (million toe¹)

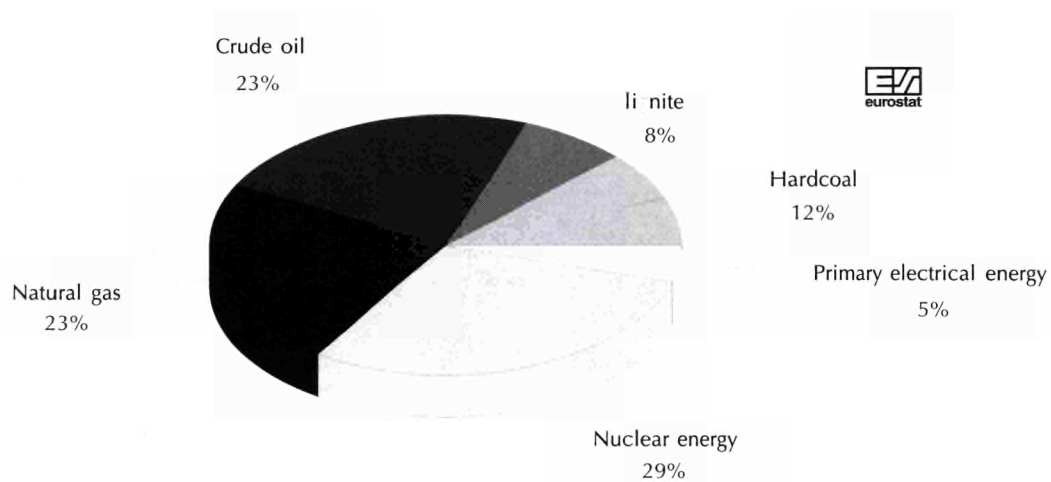
	EUR 15	B	DK	D	GR	E	F	IRL	I	L	NL	A	P	FIN	S	UK
1994	1286.7	50.2	19.3	332.2	21.4	93.3	214.3	10.2	152.2	3.7	68.6	22.2	16.9	24.1	24.1	216.8
1995	1308.4	52.3	19.2	329.8	22.3	98.7	220.6	10.1	159.5	3.3	71.8	21.9	18.3	22.8	22.8	216.6
1995/1994 %	1.7	4.3	-0.3	-0.7	3.9	5.8	2.9	-1.5	4.8	-12.0	4.6	-1.5	8.0	-5.4	-5.4	-0.1

(¹) toe = tonne of oil equivalent

Primary energy production in the European Union (EUR 15) rose 1.8% over 1994, to reach 689.8 million toe in 1995

The trend in primary production by product between 1994 and 1995 reveals an increase of 3% in coal production in the European Union (EUR 15), with the United Kingdom recording +7.1% and Germany +2.1%. Crude oil production rose by 1.8% in the European Union, an increase attributable mainly to the United Kingdom, Italy and Denmark. At 29% nuclear energy accounted for the largest share of total primary energy production in 1995, followed by natural gas and crude oil at 23%.

Primary energy production broken down by product - 1995 (EUR 15)



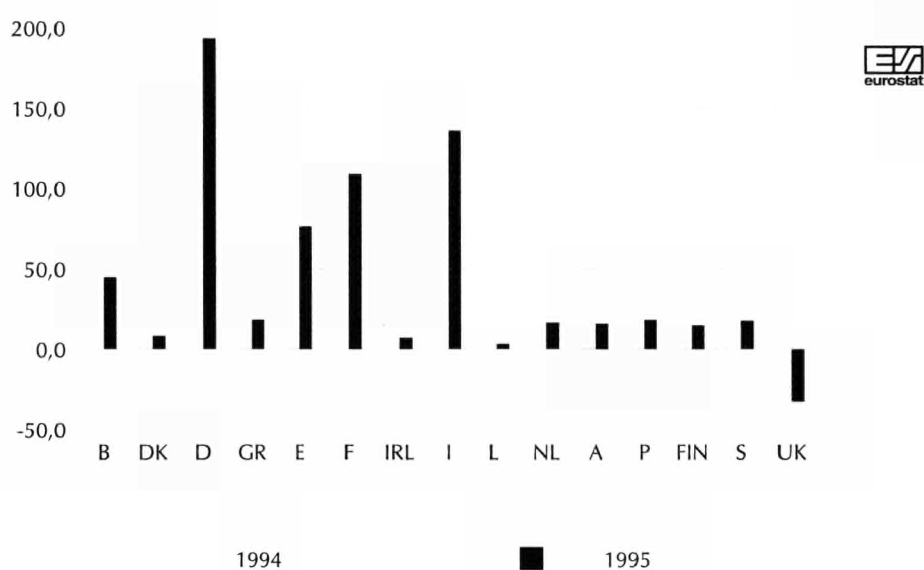
Primary energy production (million toe)

	EUR 15	B	DK	D	GR	E	F	IRL	I	L	NL	A	P	FIN	S	UK
1994	677.6	10.6	13.7	137.4	7.8	28.0	110.3	3.4	27.8	0.0	64.6	5.7	1.1	7.9	23.4	235.9
1995	689.8	11.0	14.0	137.1	7.9	26.9	114.1	3.3	27.2	0.0	65.0	5.8	0.8	7.9	23.2	245.7
1995/1994 %	1.7	4.4	2.2	-0.2	0.4	-3.8	3.4	-4.1	-2.0	-24.1	0.6	1.2	-24.4	-0.4	-0.9	4.2

In the European Union (EUR 15) net energy imports rose by 2.8% in 1994 to 645.6 million toe

All countries are net importers with the exception of the United Kingdom which recorded a negative balance of -32.6 million toe in 1995. Among the major importers, the greatest increases were reported in Spain with a rise in net imports of 10.7%, and in Italy, which recorded an increase of 7%.

Net imports ⁽¹⁾ of primary energy (million toe)



Net imports ⁽¹⁾ of primary energy (million toe)

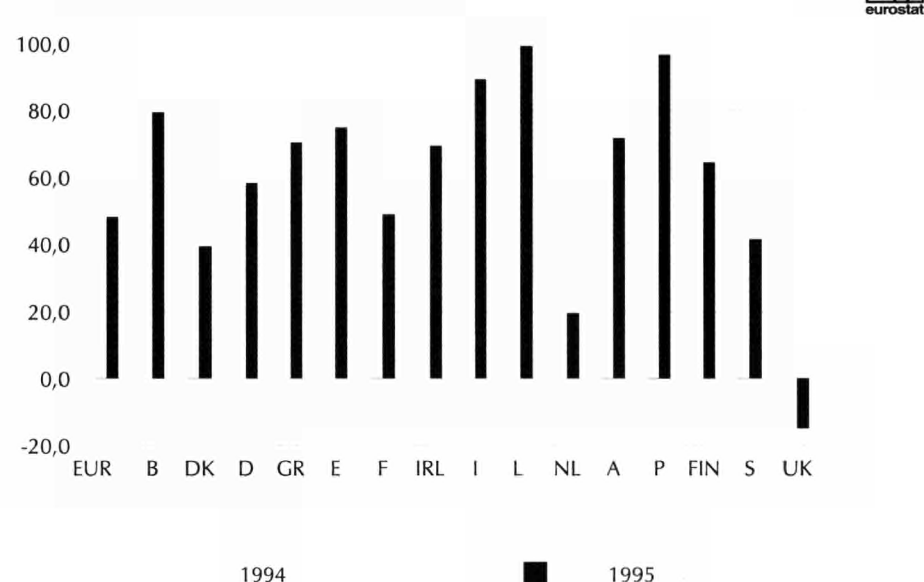
	EUR 15	B	DK	D	GR	E	F	IRL	I	L	NL	A	P	FIN	S	UK
1994	628.1	43.9	6.5	191.4	15.8	69.0	106.5	6.6	126.9	3.7	17.1	16.5	16.1	17.3	19.5	-28.7
1995	645.6	44.8	8.2	193.4	18.2	76.4	108.9	7.1	135.8	3.2	16.3	4.7	18.0	14.8	17.5	-32.6
1995/1994%	2.8	1.9	27	1.0	15.6	10.7	2.2	7.1	7.0	-12.8	-4.8	-4.7	11.9	-14	-14	13.8

⁽¹⁾ Imports minus exports

The European Union's (EUR 15) level of energy dependence rose from 47.5% in 1994 to 48% in 1995

Among all net importers the Netherlands recorded the lowest level of energy dependence in 1995 at 19.6%, whereas Luxembourg recorded the highest dependence at around 100% (99.3%). The United Kingdom is a net exporter of energy. The greatest drop in the level of energy dependence between the two reference years was recorded in the three new Member States (Austria, Sweden, Finland).

Level of energy dependence ⁽¹⁾



Level of energy dependence ⁽¹⁾

	EUR 15	B	DK	D	GR	E	F	IRL	I	L	NL	A	P	FIN	S	UK
1994	47.5	80.7	31.1	57.3	62.1	71.4	49.2	64.4	82.0	99.2	21.4	74.1	93.3	70.4	46.2	-13.1
1995	48.0	79.4	39.3	58.3	70.4	74.9	48.8	69.4	89.3	99.3	19.6	71.7	96.7	64.5	41.4	-14.9

⁽¹⁾ Net imports/internal consumption.

ERM, which now includes 11 currencies. Those remaining outside are the Swedish crown, the Greek drachma, the Italian lira and the British pound.

● Obstacles to cross-border training

Why are certain Europeans unable to follow training courses in another EU country? To answer this question and to suggest solutions, the European Commission published a White Paper on 2 October. The document looks at the cases of Europeans who do not benefit from the freedom of movement guaranteed by the EU treaties. These include the unemployed who lose their right to benefits if they follow a training programme of more than three months in another country, and young professionals who lose their residence rights if they take part in an internship of more than three months in another EU State. Then there are students whose scholarships force them to study in one particular country. The mutual recognition of educational diplomas and of study periods remains hypothetical in many instances outside the framework of European programmes like Erasmus.

● Benchmarking for all

To boost the competitiveness of European industry, the European Commission proposed on 9 October to the Council and the European Parliament a programme of benchmarking. The idea is to evaluate the factors of competitiveness at company and sectoral level so as to measure European industry with its best competitors worldwide. The Commission proposes a series of pilot projects beginning in 1997 with a common set of rules and common indicators. A joint effort at European level could be of particular interest to SMEs. The Commission has already carried out a first experiment of this kind in the sector of electronic components. Others will follow in the automotive and IT sectors.

○ IN BRIEF

In its **1996 annual report on employment**, the European Commission highlights some disturbing trends. These include a sharp rise in the number of long-term unemployed in 1995, as well as the high level of unemployment among young people and women. To counter these trends, the report, published on 9 October, proposes an increase in investments, more flexible working arrangements and urges Europeans not to be put off by fear of new technologies or by the globalization of the economy. It insists on the need for educational qualifications for young people.

The European Commission launched an action plan on 2 October to accelerate the availability of **information technologies in primary, secondary and vocational schools**. The aim is to interconnect existing networks, to develop special European teaching software, to train teachers and heighten awareness throughout the education sector.

On 14 October, the Council of the Union agreed to the creation in each Member State of a special unit to centralize **information concerning stolen works of art**. The first stage will be to exchange information between national units. This will be followed by the installation of a computerized system for identifying stolen works of art.

In the light of the latest scientific and technical evidence, the Commission proposed a directive on 27 September, setting **stricter norms for the use of x-rays and radio isotopes** for medical purposes. The draft directive insists on the need for qualified personnel to carry out the necessary examinations and for doctors who prescribe treatment to be fully informed.

Eurostat, the European statistical office, hopes to reduce the amount of **statistics which companies are required to provide**. On 20 September, it announced that a special seminar will be held for companies in Luxembourg on 15 and 16 January 1997. The meeting will see whether government statistical services could provide more data. Those interested in taking part should contact Mrs Eisen, DG IX, BOCC, JMO B2/91, L-2920 Luxembourg (tel: +352 4301 33164 or 32776; fax: +352 4301 34851).

In a report on 9 October, the European Commission analysed the crisis facing the different **EU customs and transit systems** (Community, common or

TIR) and presents reform suggestions from interested public and private bodies. According to the Commission, the inadequacy of these systems and their management methods have given rise to huge opportunities for fraud.

In 1995, 44% of EU funds from the **fourth R&D framework programme** went to companies representing 40% of participants. In 1994, the figures were 38% and 26% respectively. Last year a total of 20% of participating companies were SMEs, compared with 17% the previous year. These figures come from the first assessment of the framework programme published by the European Commission on 26 September.

The European Commission proposed on 26 September that routine medical treatment should be available for **students** studying in another EU country than their own. At present such students have only the right to urgent or emergency treatment. In the same proposal, the Commission seeks to promote the use of telematics to exchange information between national social security organizations.

As part of its preparation for the **reform of the social dialogue at EU level**, the European Commission adopted a consultation document on 18 September in order to gather the views of the social partners before the end of the year. In the document, the Commission insists on the need to rationalize the social dialogue and to make better use of available resources.

The **European Patent Office** registered 30 792 applications in 1994, 2.5% more than the previous year. Announcing these figures, Eurostat said that Germany submitted most patent applications with 12 785, followed by France (5 182), the United Kingdom (4 416), Italy (2 471), the Netherlands (1 710) and Sweden (1 405).

DECISION-TAKERS BACK EUROPE

Within the European Union people at high levels of responsibility in politics, government, business, trade unions, the media, teaching, culture and religion are more pro-European in their opinions than the average EU citizen. This is the conclusion of a Eurobarometer survey carried out between February and May 1996 involving 3 778 decision-takers. The results were published at the end of September. A total of 94% of decision-takers consider their country's membership of the EU to be a good thing, against 48% of the general public. Moreover, 90% of decision-takers, against 45% of the general public, consider their country has benefited from its EU membership. When it comes to the single currency, 85% of decision-takers are favourable against 53% among the general public. Only 13% of decision-takers are against the single currency compared with 33% of EU citizens as a whole. Luxembourg, Belgium and Spain have the highest proportion of decision-takers who support the euro, while the United Kingdom and Sweden have the highest number of opponents (33% and 30% respectively). Those in favour of the single currency cite economic reasons like stability and competitiveness (41%), political reasons like European integration (35%), commercial reasons like the disappearance of transaction costs of multiple currencies (23%), or monetary reasons such as lower interest rates (18%).

SEEN FROM ABROAD

► The euro in Washington

The EU's partners — the United States, Japan and Canada — showed a keen interest in the preparations for economic and monetary union when finance ministers from the Group of Seven met in Washington on 29 September. 'We had some very useful discussions on progress towards economic and monetary union in Europe', said Robert Rubin, US treasury secretary who chaired the meeting, in his official statement. And he added in an informal remark: 'It would be fair to say that all of them made it clear they were heading for economic and monetary union'.

◆ New challenges for Euro Info Centres

The network of Euro Info Centres (EICs) who are responsible for keeping SMEs in their region informed of the activities of the European Union held their seventh annual conference in Brussels on 20 and 21 September. The two main themes were the creation of the single currency, the euro; and the future role of the EICs in the third pluriannual European programme for SMEs.

The Euro Info Centres will be associated with the information campaigns envisaged by the European Commission for the launch of the euro. During the conference, several working groups raised the question of the impact of the creation of the euro on the activities of SMEs, support to be given to companies during the transition to the euro, and the information campaigns themselves. To respond to the needs of SMEs in this field, EICs have already organized seminars, conferences and training. They have also developed a number of information tools. They will also be taking part in the information campaign launched by DG XXIII, which is responsible for SME policy, in order to heighten the awareness of company chief executives of the concrete implications of the single currency.

As for the future SME pluriannual programme, it will make the EICs the first access point for the EU's activities and programmes in favour of SMEs. Conference working groups also looked at ways of strengthening relations with the other departments of the European Commission and with local suppliers of services to SMEs like chambers of commerce and professional associations. The general conclusion was that the quality of the EIC network must be improved and that it should work more closely with other networks and organizations, while continuing to stress and

spread the 'good practices' developed by the EICs.

◆ European information for SMEs at Brussels airport

Located in the arrivals hall of Brussels national airport at Zaventem, the 'Airport Forum — Business and Welcome Services' offers company managers a business area complete with telephones, faxes, photocopiers, reception and secretarial services, hostesses, drivers and even individual office space. As part of the Forum, the Commission's SME department (DG XXIII) has an information stand which supplies rapid information concerning European policies and initiatives in favour of the corporate sector: Euro Info Centres, Europartenariat, Interprise, BC-Net, BRE, joint actions with Member States, initiatives to promote sub-contracting, handicrafts, the cooperative sector, retailing and tourism. The Airport Forum is open seven days a week from 06.00 to 21.00.

◆ Crafts and small firms: December conference in Dublin

As part of the preparations for the third European conference on handicrafts and small businesses, the Irish Forbairt institution is organizing a conference entitled 'Lifelong financing for businesses' jointly with the Irish Ministry of Enterprise and Labour. Among the themes of the conference, to be held on 5 and 6 December, are: different sources of finance, payment delays and their impact on company liquidity, and new national and European programmes to improve the financial situation of companies. To register, please contact Mrs K. Fitzgerald, 35-39 Shelbourne Road, Ballsbridge, Dublin 4, Ireland (tel: +353 1 609 21 26; fax: +353 1 660 5019).

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It can be accessed through the Europa server (<http://europa.eu.int>).

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