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REGIONS: What Europeans think of their region

With statistics to back them up, specialists can easily show that certain regions of Europe are more favoured than others as far as employment, economies, transportation and other sectors are concerned. But are these disparities recognized by the inhabitants of those regions? Are these people aware that they are advantaged, or disadvantaged, in relation to other European citizens?

To find the answer, the European Commission questioned from April 8 to May 5, 1980, in a major public opinion survey 8892 persons throughout the then-nine (and now ten) Member States. The aim of this poll, whose results have just been published, was to gauge the level of information and awareness of the residents, and their attitudes towards the situation in their region. Some 37 per cent of those questioned believe they live in a declining region or one which has temporary difficulties, 35 per cent feel that conditions in their area are fairly stable, 19 per cent think that their zone is currently expanding, while 9 per cent have no opinion. Difficulties are felt especially in Great Britain, France, Belgium, while the most optimistic were the Irish, Danes and Luxembourgers.

A series of questions was especially concerned with different aspects of local life. The answers revealed that, on certain subjects, such as the hopes of young people for the future or the likelihood of finding work, people in these areas feel that the situation is worse than in other regions of the Community. These results indicate that attitudes toward everyday conditions take a precedent over purely regional considerations. On the other hand, 38 per cent of Europeans contacted think that the area they live in benefits from advantages in living conditions and the degree of satisfaction concerning social and cultural facilities is also fairly high in all countries, except Italy.

The pollsters also sought to learn if opinions given corresponded closely to those in each Member State. Italians showed themselves to be by far the most concerned about social and cultural disparities between the different regions of their country. They were followed by France, Germany and the United Kingdom. The reverse showed the most homogenous to be Ireland and Denmark. Finally, on the subject of whether Europeans would consider leaving their area to live elsewhere, the majority answer was everywhere a negative one, although there were sizeable minorities of positive answers in France, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands.

EMPLOYMENT: The impact of energy problems and technological change

The struggle against unemployment is now priority number one among European public authorities. Virtually all studies agree that unless a major effort is undertaken to reverse the trend, the number of job-seekers will continue to increase in the years to come.

These grim prospects are the result of, on the one hand, demographic conditions and, on the other, an economic climate characterised by an increase in the price of raw materials, the expansion of automation and the capture of world markets by major multinational corporations.

The Committee of Employment and Social Affairs of the European Parliament has just prepared a voluminous report on the repercussions of energy problems and technological change on employment in the European Community. This report is accompanied by a resolution which will soon be submitted to the Parliament for its approval.

In this text, the Parliamentary Committee presents a number of recommendations for the energy and technological conversion of European industry in order to promote the creation of new employment. It foresees especially the expansion of coal production in order to improve the employment situation in mining regions of Britain, France, Belgium and Germany, which have been struggling for some 20 years to cope with a decline in this industry.

In this light, the report urges the European Community to approve substantial investments in this sector to avoid a decline in competitiveness against coal imported from other countries where working conditions are less costly. The Committee on Employment and Social Affairs also feels that the continuation and expansion of energy conservation and recycling programmes could create work for a growing number of persons. The development of "soft" energies, such as solar, wind, biomass and others, will also require trained manpower to build, install, maintain and monitor the new facilities.

In regards to technological development and especially the expansion of the micro-electronics sector, the Committee does not hide its fears about the possibility that these innovations might trigger a new reduction in the number of jobs available. Nevertheless, the manufacture of microprocessors and related products in the European Community could also have a beneficial impact on employment if there were additional emphasis put on new products and services.

The Committee urges additional use of these new technologies in the fields of education. It comments that the use of these technologies requires advanced technical training for personnel involved and that no serious effort has been made up to now to assure this training. That's why it proposes that the European Social Fund give priority in the future to training for new technologies and that the financing available for such programmes be increased by 30 per cent a year. Finally, it believes it to be "extremely urgent to completely inform all the social partners on the general evolution of new technologies as well as the consequences of their use in industry".

DEMOGRAPHY: Europe of the elderly

Elderly persons rarely grab the attention of statistical surveys because they are no longer part of the working population and as such are left in the margins of a society dominated by employment concerns.

But a recent special publication of the European Community Statistical Office (EUROSTAT) has just been devoted to retired persons in the Member States. Figures reveal for instance that persons above the age of 65 represent 13.8 per cent of the total population, or about 35 million persons, including 21 million women. These facts confirm that the average life expectancy remains considerably higher for women than for men.

But the demographic composition varies from one Member States to the other. For example, persons of over 65 represent 15 per cent of the German population, but only 11 per cent of the Dutch population. Throughout the Community, however, there is a tendency toward an ageing population, since the proportion of those over 65 is now about 14 per cent while in 1960 it was only 11 per cent.

Other data published by EUROSTAT reveals that 12.3 per cent of European between 65 and 69 are still professionally employed, but that the percentage is only 3.5 per cent after 70.

Lastly, the age at which persons first receive pensions for the elderly is especially low in Italy (56 years old) but sharply higher than anywhere else in Ireland (67 years).

TEXTILE: The road to an upturn

Is the monokini fashion responsible for the crisis in the textile sector? As appealing as this may seem, the idea isn't enough to explain the problems which the European textile and clothing industries are currently facing. The real reasons behind this crisis can most likely be found in the strong pressure being exercised by foreign competition and a slowdown in demand by consumers.

At the same time that the European Community is negotiating the renewal of the Multifibre Agreement (MFA) which governs world textile trade, the European Commission has just addressed an analytical document to the Council of Ministers on the prospects for the textile sector in the Community. Right from the start, the Commission insists on the need to restructure the European industry in order to restore its competitiveness and to halt the loss in jobs, which in recent years are at the root of important social and regional problems.

The Commission recalls that the textile and clothing industries employ no less than 9.6 per cent of the total manpower in Community manufacturing industries. They are also characterised by a diversity of products, methods and structures and also possess a number of assets which can and must be developed, such as a creative tradition -- especially in small and medium-sized enterprises, the dimension of a Community market and existence of a complete textile production system.

On a world scale, the Community represents the second largest market after the United States. To fully benefit from this market, manufacturers must operate in a truly unified market where all barriers between Member States have been eliminated. This objective constitutes one of the main goals established by the European Commission for the future, with the other priorities being the development of exports and the maintenance of all types of essential production.

To achieve these goals, the Community will seek to use a certain number of means, including the development of flexibility in production, the coordination of Government assistance, the promotion of technology and innovation, investment stimulation and others.

Finally, the European Commission reaffirms its faith in the retention of a viable textile industry, while acknowledging that the general increase in productivity resulting from technological advances and the closure of the least competitive plants will result in new job losses in the years to come.

DEVELOPMENT: Promoting Third World handicrafts

Every major shopping area in each one of the EC states today invariably has a shop selling handicrafts exported by developing countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

Exotic baskets, bamboo chairs, multi-coloured pottery, exquisite china and beautiful, but practical, clothes from the Third World adorn the shelves of every major European department store and even super markets. Handicrafts, like tourism, have become a boom industry for some developing countries. By definition, handicrafts require a minimum of production machinery. Based on local designs and local raw materials, the handicraft trade has several advantages. It does not, under normal circumstances, lead to a disruption of local cultural traditions. Craftsmen can work at home, as their own masters, rather than in factories or mines. Value is added to the raw material in the developing nation itself and not in the industrialised countries.

Handicrafts can create jobs for men, women and children. The small-scale organisation required in setting up a village workshop is also often ideally suited for promoting "grassroots development".

The biggest job providers are the textile trade, the leather trade, pottery and the production of agricultural implements. Although available data indicates that handicrafts can represent up to 70 to 96 per cent of the Third World's labour force and more than a third of the added value in the manufacturing industry, experts note that the importance of the craft sector is not reflected in the development plans of most of the countries of the Third World.

More effort is also needed in promoting handicrafts trade. Experts note that purely decorative objects, such as statues have their market, but that it is a relatively stable one which tends to be confined to small distribution networks.

Objects for which there is the greatest demand are the functional ones. The EC has been involved in promoting exports of handicrafts particularly from the African, Caribbean and Pacific signatories of the Lomé Convention for several years. Community aid frequently takes the form of financing ACP participation in European trade fairs and loans to local ACP small and medium-size industries.

TRANSPORTATION: An administrative simplification under study

A Belgian van-hire company advertises boldly: "We carry anything from a Rubens, to a computer or a green hippopotamus. Anything". There are in fact fewer and fewer limits on the transport capacities of modern vehicles, except perhaps for administrative restrictions.

Currently, in order to haul goods above a certain dimension, special authorisation must be requested, which must in every Member State of the European Community be granted by local administrations. In France, for example, a request for a separate authorisation must be made in every department travelled through. Even though the procedures seem flexible enough in some countries, it also seems evident that a centralised system could make the process less complicated, lengthy or costly.

The European Commission, in March 1979 began to study the problem and organised discussions between experts. In reply to a question in the European Parliament on the subject, it just indicated that it was currently examining a first proposal at the Community level aiming at the preparation of a single multilingual form requesting authorisation for transports between Member States.

THIRD WORLD: Nobel prize winners speak out

More than 50 Nobel prize winners from all around the world recently published a manifesto calling for an all-out campaign against hunger and starvation which menaces the lives of millions of human beings. This appeal is in keeping with a resolution adopted on September 18, 1980, by the European Parliament on the contribution of the European Community in the fight against hunger in the world. It was only natural therefore that the manifesto by the Nobel prize winners would receive vigorous support from the European Parliament, which has always been sensitive to this increasingly dramatic problem. A proposed resolution has just been presented by an Italian member, Panella, asking the European Commission to establish an emergency plan designed to help some 5 million human beings escape the jaws of death from starvation by 1982.

NOTICE TO READERS: After long weeks of faithful service, the EUROFOCUS staff is preparing to emulate many other persons around Europe by taking a break. The current edition is the last of this season and number 30/81 will be dated September 21. By that time we will be back, tanned, fresh and alert as ever to present European topics we hope will be of interest to you. Happy holiday to all!