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Mailed from: Brussels X

REGIONS: Somewhat greater regional disparities than in the U.S. ...
... but (surprise, surprise) fewer than in Canada or Switzerland.

It's common knowledge that the Portuguese and Greeks don't enjoy the same living standards as the denizens of Hamburg or Munich. The fact is there are wide differences in prosperity levels between the regions and countries of the 12-nation European Community. But how many Europeans realize that these differences are even greater in the case of the Swiss cantons and Canadian provinces? And while they are smaller in the case of the United States, they nevertheless remain significant.

These somewhat surprising facts are contained in an article written by the European Commission President, Jacques Delors, for the committee for the study of economic and monetary union and published this summer. The article notes that the per-capita gross domestic product (GDP) is 1.44 times higher on the West Coast than in the South-east, to take two of the nine major regions into which the U.S. is divided for census purposes. If the EC were divided into regions of comparable sizes, there would be a difference of 1 to 1.85% between the Iberian peninsula (Spain + Portugal) and the North-east (Germany + Denmark). This is not so bad for an emergent European Community when compared to a federation of American states that has been in existence for more than 200 years. Jacques Delors has underlined the fact that 50 years ago the poorest region of the U.S. - the South-east - had a per-capita GDP which came to no more than 53% of the average for the country; today, it comes to 86%.

Comparisons with two other federal states, Switzerland and Canada, are more flattering for the 12-nation Community. In these two countries the richest regions - canton or province - are twice as well off as the least prosperous regions in terms of per-capita production.

Europeans have few grounds for self-congratulation, however; the EC has already begun to reduce these regional differences, with some success, it would seem. Private investments will have increased far more in the Community's less prosperous regions this year, according to the Commission. They are expected to rise by 23% in Ireland and 19% in Spain and Portugal, as compared to the average for the Community of 10%. In 1992 the Community should contribute between 15 and 20% of the investments in the less well-off member countries. Clearly there are grounds for optimism

REGIONAL AID: ECU 36 billion for the weakest regions

The EC's southern and western regions will benefit.

Between now and the end of 1993, the economically weaker regions of the 12-nation European Community will receive ECU 36,200mn.* from Community funds. The European Commission allocated on September 20 some ECU 9,800mn. to the south and south-west of Spain, more than ECU 7,400mn. to the Italian Mezzogiorno, nearly ECU 7,000mn. to Portugal, almost ECU 6,700mn. to Greece and some ECU 3,700mn. to Ireland. Corsica and France's overseas departments will receive just under ECU 900mn. and Northern Ireland ECU 793mn.

This aid, which should enable the regions in question to get ready for the single market, will be in addition to the funds paid out by the national and regional authorities in the Community. In announcing the Commission's decision the Commissioner for regional policy, Bruce Millan, pointed out that the European Commission will ensure that the 12 governments meet their obligations.

Thanks to the aid just announced by the Commission, the total Community funds granted to the regions in question for the year 1992 will amount to twice the financial aid they enjoyed in 1987; in point of fact, this will require supplementary aid amounting to ECU 2,100mn., which will be devoted to "Community initiatives" that the Commission will propose towards the end of this year.

* 1 ECU = UK£0.67 or IR£0.78

CONSUMERS: European labels for washing powders

The European Commission adopts a recommendation aimed at manufacturers.

Hereafter manufacturers of detergents and other cleaning agents will have to print on the package itself the names of certain dangerous substances, should their level exceed 0.2%. The list of the substances in question is contained in a recommendation adopted by the European Commission on September 13 and addressed to manufacturers marketing their products within the Community.

The recommendation also invites them to show the degree of concentration of dangerous substances, the presence of enzymes and preservatives and to supply consumers detailed instructions for use, clearly visible on the package.

As its name suggests, the recommendation is not binding. Its contents were drawn up by the Commission in cooperation with two groups of European manufacturers and it relies for its implementation on the Commission, manufacturers and government departments in the Member States trusting each other, as the European internal market commissioner,

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Martin Bangemann, has pointed out. Even so, the introduction of this recommendation should make it possible for household cleaning products to be freely available throughout the Community, without any loss of consumer protection.

However, should the Commission find that the implementation of its recommendation is unsatisfactory, it will propose a Community regulation, which will need the approval of the EC Council of Ministers.

INTERNAL MARKET: A border-free but safe market for firearms

The European Commission proposes a "European firearms card".

The 1992 single market should not endanger the safety of the European Community's citizens; on the contrary, it should strengthen it. And this is what the European Commission had in mind when it proposed a Community regulation on firearms to the Twelve on September 20. The system it envisages is based on the agreement concluded between the five EC countries belonging to the "Schengen group"* - the Benelux countries, France and Germany - which seeks to eliminate all border controls between them even before 31 December 1992.

The Commission's new proposal modifies the one it presented some two years ago. It envisages the creation of a "European firearms card", identifying both the arm in question and its legal holder. Thanks to this card, huntsmen and shooting enthusiasts could take their guns with them throughout the 12-nation Community.

The Commission favours dividing firearms into four categories: (1) military hardware and dangerous weapons which individuals are banned from keeping; (2) defensive weapons, requiring the prior permission of the authorities; (3) sporting guns, which can be sold freely but must be notified to the authorities and, finally, (4) other firearms, which would not be subject to any formality.

The projected regulation would require all shops selling firearms in the Community to keep a register, in which would be recorded the movements of all firearms belonging to the first three categories, together with their characteristics and the names and addresses of both suppliers and buyers. The draft regulation would also cover entry to the profession: the national authorities would need to have proof of the good personal character and competence of the applicant before allowing him to deal in firearms.

If the proposal is adopted by the Twelve, it will lead to the introduction of much stricter controls in several EC countries. However, it will leave unchanged national legislation on the detention of firearms.

COMPETITION: Community inspectors can search business premises

The EC Court of Justice upholds the European Commission.

In EC countries, anxious to uphold the rights of man, a policeman or inspector from a government department cannot enter people's homes without their permission, unless he has the necessary search warrant. The EC's Court of Justice has now ruled that this principle of the inviolability of the home does not apply to business premises. Besides, the legislation on checks on businesses varies greatly from one EC country to another.

The European Court, in other words, ruled in favour of the European Commission and against the German chemical giant, Hoechst, which had closed its doors to the Commission's inspectors, who were looking into violations of the Community's competition rules. Hoechst had wrongly waited for a German judge to issue a search warrant before letting the inspectors in.

ANIMALS: What future for calves and pigs in the single market?

The European Commission proposes measures aimed at guaranteeing their welfare.

Will the 1992 single market improve living conditions for the European Community's calves and pigs? The question may seem absurd - or provocative. But the European Commission has just sent the EC Council of Ministers a draft of a Community regulation aimed at ensuring more human treatment for calves and pigs that are being fattened for the market under "modern" methods.

The Commission's proposal, whose inspiration is a 1987 resolution of the European Parliament, is not motivated simply by a desire to put a stop to innocent animals being transformed into fattening machines. It has an economic dimension as well: the conditions in which farm animals are raised directly influences production costs for meat. But EC countries, especially Germany and the Netherlands, which already protect these animals through their own laws, want to make sure their producers are not penalized in the single market.

The European Commission has therefore asked the Twelve to harmonize upwards their legislation by 1 January 1992 for all new installations and by 1999 for other equipment. The standards envisaged cover not only the space calves and pigs must be allowed but also their feed, upkeep of buildings, heating and noise control. The Commission's proposal also provides for on-site checks by Community inspectors.

CONSUMERS: Castles in Spain

The European Parliament seeks to protect those wanting to buy real estate in another EC country.

In 1984 Mr and Mrs Wilson of Doncaster answered an advertisement by a U.K. company and went to Palma, in the Balearic Islands. Here, after having visited several properties, they decided to buy a bar. They made a downpayment of £3,500 and, shortly afterwards, paid the balance of £33,000. In June that same year they settled their affairs in England only to discover, on arriving in Palma, that the bar was in someone else's hands. The representative of the U.K. company told the Wilsons that he had invested their money in another, more expensive, property which he claimed was a better investment. Reluctantly they agreed and made a further payment. But work on the building was at a virtual standstill. A Spanish lawyer told the Wilsons the purchase contract was fraudulent and advised them to take the company to court in England. They did so and in December 1984 the court ordered the repayment of the sum of £42,500. But the Wilsons did not see their money as the company went into bankruptcy in 1985. Its manager nevertheless set up a new company and is active once again in the Spanish property market.

In 1980 Mr Schoufs was seduced by advertisements for a building project in Almeria, consisting of several thousand villas, a shopping centre, an artificial lake and a sports centre. He went to Spain and made a downpayment of 10%, on a house yet to be built, to a property developer, Belgian like himself. On returning home Mr Schoufs began to have doubts and made no further payments. He lost his 10% - but other buyers, who had kept up their payments, lost a good deal more. To date only a few hundred villas have been built, often badly, and in any case are worth no more than a third of the initial sale price. Moreover, no shopping or sports centre was ever built.

In 1983 Mr and Mrs Lüssman, of Germany, bought a house in Orcheta, near Alicante, which turned out to be in such a run-down condition that it would have been dangerous to live in it. The house had been built, moreover, in an illegal housing estate. Here, without the authorization of the local department of urbanism, nor the necessary technical advice of a qualified architect, the property developer had built more than 70 homes, nearly all of which had been sold to foreign tourists. The habitability certificates as well as the deeds of purchase and sale had been forged in most cases. The Lüssmans were obliged to return to Germany, having lost nearly all their money.

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One million foreigners have bought properties along the Mediterranean coast in Spain in recent years; in 1986 their purchases accounted for some 12% of the country's tourist income. But the dream of a home in the sun can turn into a nightmare for many an imprudent buyer.

The European Parliament, which has received more than 400 complaints in this connection, wants adequate legal protection against such frequent occurrences as the bankruptcy of property developers, defects in construction and defective deeds. The law Euro-MPs are looking for would allow buyers a cooling-off period: if they cancelled a contract within seven days of having signed it they would be entitled to a full refund. The law would also cover unfair contracts and misleading advertisements; and it would require the seller to place the sums received from the buyer in a separate account or with an intermediary.

The resolution calls on the European Commission to publish a guide aimed at potential buyers of real estate in another EC country. The publication would be part of the Commission's action programme on the protection of consumers and tourists. The Euro-MPs also call on the Member States to create, in the context of 1992, a public Community register, to be available in all Member States, listing the names of all those who are banned from taking on the management of a company or other commercial responsibilities.

The Euro-MPs have not forgotten, however, to urge potential buyers to take greater care and to ask someone who is both independent and professionally qualified to check everything before making any payments to the seller. No one is required to buy a pig in a poke.

SOCIETY: The right to change one's sex

The European Parliament asks the Member States to adopt measures aimed at ending discrimination against transsexuals.

Most European countries today recognize transsexualism to be a syndrome, one which has existed at all times and in all countries, although the term itself dates back to the 1960s only, when surgical intervention became possible. The syndrome is relatively rare, affecting one person in 100,000, with men three times more likely than women to ask for a sex change.

The condition must not be confused with intersexuality, which is the coexistence within the same person of a mixture of both male and female sexual characteristics, nor with transvestism, which involves dressing in the clothing of the opposite sex.

Transsexuals generally have a tendency to hypersensibility, stress, depression and suicidal acts. They have difficulty in adjusting to close contacts and intimacy and often take drugs and drink to excess. What probably are personality problems are doubtless aggravated by the social problems facing transsexuals. Discriminated against and marginalized nearly everywhere, they are subject on occasion to criminal jurisdiction.

Only four Member States have recognized their right to sex change, under strict conditions, and a legal recognition of this change: Denmark, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands. In France and Luxembourg they can ask for their birth certificates to be modified in certain cases, something which is not possible in the six remaining EC countries. However, their problems do not end with the official recognition of their sex change.

Only the Danish health service reimburses transsexuals the full cost of the operation. Reimbursement in Germany depends on whether the operation was considered essential from the medical point of view, while the Dutch health service has set a ceiling (7,500 florins). The problem of social re-integration is aggravated by the difficulty of finding employment: in the period prior to the operation the unemployment rate varies from 60 to 80%.

In the face of this situation, the European Parliament has adopted a resolution asking the Member States to (1) recognize the right of transsexuals to seek a sex change through treatment by an endocrinologist, plastic surgery and esthetic treatment and (2) draw up a procedure which guarantees them everything from a change in diagnosis to hormonal treatment for a trial period, surgical intervention following its authorization by experts, legal recognition and continued supervision by psychotherapists and doctors.

Euro-MPs also favour setting up bodies to advise transsexuals; reimbursement by the health services; help from social workers for those who have lost their employment or accommodation as well as measures that would make it easier for transsexuals to find jobs.

HEALTH: A ban on smoking in public places

The European Parliament wants a genuine European law.

It's smokers who are abnormal, not non-smokers, according to the British Euro-MP Terence Wynn. He did not mince his words during a debate in the European Parliament on the banning of smoking in public places. The Irish Euro-MP, Mary Banotti, was no less forthright. She pointed out that in recent years the incidence of lung cancer among women had risen from 5 to 16%; women in fact were overtaking men in their dedication to the weed.

The European Parliament followed the lead of its two members with some exceptions, including the Italian Marco Pannella, who is campaigning to legalize all drugs, including hard drugs like heroin. The Euro-MPs have asked the European Commission to change its draft "recommendation" into a Community directive, on the grounds that it might remain a dead letter without a genuine European law. They favour a compulsory ban on smoking in "enclosed surroundings" intended for public use but would agree to space being set aside for smokers. In the event of a conflict at the workplace, the Euro-MPs believe that the non-smoker's right to remain healthy should take precedence over the right of smokers to enjoy a good smoke. The ban on smoking would apply to all transport also.