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Mailed from: Brussels X

europa for journalists

PUBLIC OPINION IN THE EC: Support for the Community remains very high

Seven Europeans out of 10 think it should speed up its economic, political and monetary integration, according to the Eurobarometer poll.

Europeans are beginning increasingly to feel European. This is confirmed by the Eurobarometer poll of public opinion in the 12-nation European Community carried out in the spring, after six highly eventful months.

The changes in Central and Eastern Europe, on the one hand, and the unification of Germany, on the other, have logically claimed the attention of those polled. Two Europeans out of five in fact claimed to be "more conscious" now of the European Community. And no fewer than 70% of those polled, with a peak of 83% in Italy, thought that as a result of these events, the Community must speed up its economic, political and monetary integration. It is significant that 53% of those who expressed an opinion gave priority to completing the single market over moves to draw Western and Eastern Europe closer together, despite the emotional impact of the political upheavals taking place in Central and Eastern Europe since last year. This only goes to show the importance Europeans attach to European union. Their views in this matter were largely shared by the nationals of several East European countries, as is shown by the surveys carried out in Czechoslovakia, Moscow, the Soviet Union (Europe), East Germany and Lithuania. Three Muscovites out of five, one Soviet citizen out of two and 86% of East Germans had heard of the European Community. In Czechoslovakia no one claimed to have "never" heard about the European Community or read about it. Some 90% of Czechs in fact were in favour of their country joining the Community, while more than half the Lithuanians saw themselves as members in the long run.

Some 57% of Muscovites, and 53% of the other inhabitants of the European part of the Soviet Union, claimed to favour a confederation of all European countries, based on a multiparty system, free elections and freedom of expression and of the media. True, sometimes those polled in these countries had only an imperfect knowledge of the Community; but it is equally certain that the Community was seen by many of them as a myth and an ideal to strive for.

As for the Community's own citizens, they are not insensitive to the call for a wider Europe, realistic though they are and favour the completion of the single market, for the present at least.

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Thus 64% of them wanted to allow the countries of Central and Eastern Europe to benefit from the programmes and resources currently available only to Member States, in the fields of technological research, youth training and university student exchanges. Sixty-three percent would like to offer these countries treaties of association and close economic and political cooperation. This same percentage thought it essential that the Community prepare itself to welcome these countries as members, should they request it and as soon as they have established democracy and an open economy. To this end, 59% proposed a larger Community budget in order to help the countries of Central and Eastern Europe in their progress towards democracy and their economic reforms. But as charity begins at home, only 30% of the Community's citizens envisaged a reduction in Community aid for its own less favoured regions in order to provide increased aid to Central and Eastern Europe.

As for German unification, 71% of those polled in the spring of 1990 were for it, although this was a smaller percentage than recorded by the Flash poll of November 1989. Comparisons between the two polls are not easy, however, given differences in methodology. In any case, for the majority of Europeans a unified Germany should not present the European Community with any major problems. Forty-three percent of them in fact thought that a unified Germany could be integrated into the EC without any problem, while 24% had not thought about this matter.

As for the Americans, 73% of those polled in the United States favoured the unification of Western Europe and appreciated the efforts made by the Europeans to reach this goal.

Faced with such results, it would be surprising if public opinion within the Community did not follow suit. And the fact is that even the Danes, traditionally lukewarm when it comes to the European idea, have moved on the issue: 51% of them felt their country's membership of the EC to be a good thing, while 68% acknowledged in addition that Denmark had benefitted from it - an increase in each case of seven percentage points. Thirty-eight percent of Danes even admitted they would be "very sorry" if they were to leave the Community.

On the whole, 88% of those who expressed an opinion in the Eurobarometer poll supported European unification, while 72% claimed to favour the formation, between now and 1992, of a European Union with a government responsible to the European Parliament.

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A large majority (80%) in fact would like to see the powers of the Parliament enlarged, especially so that it can decide on Community legislation together with the EC Council of Ministers. In addition, eight Europeans out of 10 wanted the European Parliament empowered to ratify all international conventions and agreements before they come into force in the European Community. Even the least popular proposal was backed by 67% of those polled: it would give Parliament the right to put forward laws for the European Community on its own initiative.

If this is not the United States of Europe it certainly resembles it.

ENVIRONMENT: The European Commission publishes its report on the quality of bathing water in 1988 ...

... but the puzzle of where it is cleanest remains.

You simply cannot compare the cleanliness of bathing water in the various European Community countries, given that the standards set by their national laws are not identical. What is more, the results of the tests carried out on beaches and bathing waters are not sent to the European Commission in time, as it has noted once again. This explains the delay in publishing the 1988 report; and it means that some of the information it contains may well be out of date, either because of improvements to or further deterioration at one or other beach. Generally speaking, it can be said that the situation has improved as regards sea water, while the level of pollution has increased in the case of fresh water, with a few exceptions.

The report notes that 85% of French beaches met European standards; Italian and Spanish beaches were not far behind, at 84.4 and 81.1% respectively. Belgium and the U.K. did less well, with respectively 79.5 and 67%. Even so, beaches in both countries had improved visibly since the 1987 report. The surveillance programme proved inadequate in Greece, while Portugal is not subject to Community rules until 1992. Rivers and lakes, as mentioned earlier, are less salubrious than the seashore. The results of 76.1% of the tests on fresh water were in conformity with European standards in France and of 50.3% in Spain. If 59% of the Italian lakes were to European standards, only 10.2% of the rivers were safe for bathing.

ENVIRONMENT: Belgian water is illegal

The Court of Justice condemns Belgium for failing to meet Community drinking water standards.

When is water drinkable? The European Community adopted a law in 1990 which sets out the precise qualities water must have to be considered drinkable. Member States were allowed five years in which to bring their national legislation into line with the Community directive except in special cases, which had to be submitted to the European Commission.

Five years after the end of this grace period, Belgium has yet to conform to this directive, despite a reminder dated 4 October 1986. However, since 1989 responsibility for ensuring that water meant for human consumption is in fact safe to drink has devolved on the regions. While the Flanders region has seen to it that the EC directive is respected, the region of Wallonia has adopted legislation authorizing the maximum levels set by Community standards to be exceeded. Hence the European Commission's decision to submit the matter to the EC Court of Justice, which has now condemned Belgium for having allowed the directive to be breached in this way.

The case before the Court concerned the town of Verviers, where the drinking water has a very high level of lead. Numerous other cases are under examination in Belgium, especially in connection with nitrate levels. The European Commission, meanwhile, is still waiting for answers.

ENVIRONMENT: The Community's two black spots are ...
... the long-term unemployed and underemployed women.

Of the seven million new jobs created in the 12-nation European Community between 1985 and 1989 only one in eight was filled by someone from the dole queue. The other seven went to young people entering the labour market for the first time, to persons changing jobs of their own free will and to women who had not been part of the labour force earlier but took up jobs once they became available. Under these conditions the persistence of long-term unemployment is hardly surprising. Worse, it is rising, a fact underlined by the second annual report on employment in the European Community, published by the European Commission in early July.

While unemployment has declined overall since 1986, the proportion of those unemployed for more than a year rose from 47% of the total in 1983 to 53% in 1988. In the case of those unemployed for more than two years the rise was from 23% to 35% over the same period. No fewer than seven million people, or 5% of the Community labour force, were jobless for more than a year. In parts of Belgium, southern Italy, Spain and Ireland long-term unemployment reached and even exceeded 10%. In the southern Member States more than half the long-term unemployed were under 25 years of age.

The report highlights a second problem: the low rates of employment among women. While they hold down 38% of all jobs, 28% of women work part-time, although many would much rather work full-time if given the chance, according to surveys carried out for the Commission. Similarly, half the women in temporary employment would like to have permanent jobs. Women who work, moreover, are often over-qualified. In addition, some 21mn. women are completely outside the labour force; they neither have a job nor are they registered at an employment exchange.

The European Commission finds the present level of unemployment - 8.5% of the Community labour force - unacceptable from a social point of view and a terrible waste of human resources. It is all the more shocking given that the Community is already hit by falling birth rates and that its main competitors are less affected by under-employment. Only 59% of those of working age in the European Community are employed, as against 70 to 75% in the Nordic countries, Switzerland, Austria, the United States and Japan.

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Unfortunately all these findings appeared in last year's annual report on employment as well. Even though unemployment had declined since then, these black spots remain, and the Community's regional and social funds will not be enough to make them disappear. The European Social Affairs Commissioner, Ms Vasso Papandreou, readily admits as much, adding that the 12 Member States must make additional efforts in favour of employment.

In addition to these difficulties, events in the countries of Eastern and Central Europe could hold surprises for the Community. The reforms they have undertaken will lead to a significant increase in unemployment in the short run, with many of the jobless coming to the West to look for work. At the same time European Community companies may be tempted to take advantage of the much lower wage levels in Eastern and Central Europe. These are only some of the fresh questions to be resolved if the Community is to get rid of under-employment.

POPULATION: Immigration and falling birth rates are key issues

The EC's population rose by 1.8mn. last year.

In 1989 the population of the 12-nation European Community rose by 1.8mn. to stand at 327mn. on 1 January 1990. This is not bad for a part of the world that is facing falling birth rates. The fact is that some two-thirds of the increase was due to immigration, especially from Central and Eastern Europe. There was an estimated net inflow last year of about one million people into the Federal Republic of Germany alone. It consisted mainly of East Germans, Poles, Romanians and Soviet citizens of German origin.

Although Germany last summer received the largest number of immigrants of all the Community countries, in nearly all the EC countries in 1989 the number of immigrants exceeded the number of emigrants. The only exceptions were Spain and Ireland in particular, which "lost" some 22,000 persons a year.

Ireland also stands out because it is the only Community country with a birth rate sufficiently high to ensure generation replacement. However, last year even Ireland managed little more than the general replacement level of 2.1 children per woman.

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The experts in fact do not expect Ireland to reach this level in 1990. If so, it will have joined the other Community countries as regards fertility levels. Only in France and the U.K. is the number of children per woman still above 1.8. Denmark, with 1.62 children per woman, is still above the Community average - 1.58. This is also the Belgian average. Fertility levels are between 1.50 and 1.55 children per woman in Portugal, Greece and Luxembourg. Well behind the others are Germany (1.39), Spain (1.30) and Italy (1.29).

Although birth rates are falling, the number of births out of wedlock is not. Illegitimate births rose from 4.5% of the total in 1960 to 17.1% in 1989. The situation varies from country to country, however. 45% of births in Denmark were out of wedlock, as compared to 6% in Italy and 2% in Greece. Such births were between 25 and 30% of the total in France and the U.K., 14.5% in Portugal and between 10 and 13% in the other EC countries.

The marriage stakes are also changing from one country to another. Portugal still holds the Community record, with more than 7 marriages per thousand population. It is closely followed by the U.K. Belgium, Germany, Greece and the Netherlands are still above the Community average of 6 per thousand population (which last year was back up to its 1981 level). Denmark barely managed the Community average, while the other EC countries were below it, with France and Ireland sharing last place with 5 marriages per thousand population.

How many European marriages end in divorce? The Community's statisticians don't know, as there are no figures for Germany and Spain. Among the other EC countries (save Ireland, where divorce is not allowed) Denmark ranked first, with a divorce rate of 2.9 per thousand population, followed by the U.K. (2.6). In France and the Benelux countries the rate is around 2 per thousand population. It is below 1 in Portugal, Greece and Italy in particular, where the divorce rate is the lowest in the Community at 0.5 per thousand population.

POPULATION: Declining infant mortality ...

... and rising life expectancy, especially for women.

The infant mortality rate for the 12-nation European Community had fallen last year to one-fourth of its 1960 level. This will give some idea of the substantial progress in medicine and hygiene over the last 30 years. Last year the infant mortality rate (per 1,000 live births) was 8.2, as compared to 34.8 in 1960, according to Eurostat, the EC's statistical office.

However, none of the Twelve has succeeded in reducing infant mortality rates as much as Japan (4.8 deaths of infants under one year per 1,000 births) and Sweden (5.8 per thousand). The Netherlands are head of the class in the Community, with 6.8 deaths per 1,000 births. The rate for Denmark, Germany, France and Ireland is around 7.5 per thousand. It is slightly above the Community average in Spain, Belgium and the U.K. and stands at 8.8 per thousand in Italy and 9.9 per thousand in Luxembourg and Greece. This was also the rate for the U.S. in 1988. Portugal's infant mortality rate - 12.2 per thousand - seems rather high: even so, it is six times lower than it was in 1960 and well below the rate for the Soviet Union, which was 25.4 per thousand in 1987.

Life expectancy at birth is steadily rising in the European Community at the same time. It now stands at 72 years for men and up to 78.5 years for women. Life expectancy for women is higher than for men in all 12 European Community countries. The gap is widest in France - over 8 years - and lowest in Greece, where it is 5 years.