

COMMISSION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES
 Directorate-General Audiovisual Media, Information,
 Communication, Culture



a newssheet for journalists

Weekly N° 42/93

20 - 27 December 1993

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EUROFOCUS wishes its readers a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.
 The next issue will be dated 10 - 17 January 1994.

Mailed from Brussels X

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EUROPE: Another ECU 48 billion for job creation

A plan inspired by the European Commission's White Paper.

"There is no miracle cure for unemployment. Nor can we simply resign ourselves to it. We must act and our response will be all the more effective for being a joint one". It is with these words that the heads of state and government of the European Union presented the action plan they adopted in Brussels on December 11, during the 50th session of the European Council to be held since 1975. This plan, which has the ambition to "reduce substantially" the number of jobless by the year 2000, is largely inspired by the White Paper, "Growth, competitiveness, employment", drawn up by the European Commission and presented to the Twelve by its President, Jacques Delors.

The plan consists of both a list of actions to be undertaken at the national level and support measures at the Community level, particularly in the form of investments in infrastructure and Community-wide networks covering the railways, roads, combined road-rail transport, rivers and canals, ports and airports, gas and electricity distribution as well as computer-based telecommunications networks.

The Twelve plan to devote some ECU 20 billion* annually to the construction of these trans-European networks over the period 1994 to 1999. Of this amount nearly ECU 12 billion will come from the Community budget, the European Investment Bank and the European Investment Fund. Provision was made a year ago for this sum, which will be in the form of aid, loans and guarantees. The European Council decided to add to it another ECU 8 billion maximum, to be loaned to companies and bodies actually engaged in building the European networks, to make sure that the various projects are not halted because of a lack of funds. As the matter is an urgent one, the European Council has asked EU ministers to adopt before 1 July 1994 the remaining plans for the transport and energy networks.

However, neither the European Council's plan, nor the White Paper which has served to inspire it, represents a straightforward expenditure programme. In presenting the White Paper to the press on December 8 President Delors defined it as "a wide-ranging action plan", which exists only because some 17 million people are unemployed in the European Union.

This is why the White Paper analyses the root causes of European unemployment. In addition to the current economic downturn, the European economy is less competitive than the economies of Japan, the United States and the new Asian "tigers", such as South Korea and Taiwan. What is more, Europe is not being sufficiently quick when it comes to anticipating technological change. The White Paper also points to a number of additional shortcomings, such as excessive rigidities resulting from regulation and inadequate vocational training, for example.

To remedy the situation Europeans must take action at every level: businesses, and small and medium-sized enterprises in particular; national and regional governments and local authorities. In this connection the White Paper has listed a number of suggestions, which the EU heads of state and government have asked their ministers and businesses to turn to for inspiration.

Those suggestions which have attracted the European Council's attention in particular aim at improving education and training systems, especially continuing training; eliminating too rigid regulations which stifle employment; implementing sound formulas for the reorganization of work at enterprise level and reducing statutory contributions in the case of less-skilled work. The European Council has also recommended a more active policy of information, motivation and guidance of job-seekers; special measures for young people who leave school without adequate training and, finally, the creation of jobs to meet new requirements linked to the quality of life and protection of the environment.

The need to take full advantage of the single market, by moving towards a more decentralized economy, was stressed by the European Council. This implies encouraging the development of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

Europe has once more taken a grip of itself, by embarking on "the paths leading to the 21st century", as proposed in the White Paper.

INFORMATION: Voting in EU Council to be made public hereafter

The Twelve decide to lift the veil of secrecy surrounding their decision-making.

In all Parliaments, including those of the EU Member States - and the European Parliament - everyone knows how MPs voted. Sessions are open to the public and the proceedings are published. Voters therefore know what their elected representatives are doing ... and can draw the necessary conclusions. But for more than 30 years the EC Council of Ministers - now known as the Council of the European Union - has adopted "European laws" in the greatest secrecy, broken only by the inevitable leaks. However, the Twelve decided in early December to lift systematically the veil of secrecy which has shrouded their decision-making. They nevertheless have allowed themselves certain exceptions.

Last year, during the debate over the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty, and more especially during the referendum campaigns in Denmark and France, numerous political leaders criticized the fact that democratic procedures are flouted in the adoption of "European laws". In early October the Council took a first step, when it announced that certain of its votes would be made public if one or other Member State so demanded - and if the majority was not against it. But the European Parliament held that this was not enough, and the Council itself found the formula much too complicated.

The Twelve have finally accepted the principle of systematic publicity for voting by Member States on "European laws", most of which are now adopted by majority vote. Hereafter, voting results will be kept secret only if a majority of Council members so demand. However, it will require a unanimous decision of the Twelve before votes cast on issues relating to justice and the police, as well as foreign policy and defense, are made public. In these fields, introduced under the Treaty of Maastricht, nearly all decisions are on a basis of unanimity.

* 1 ECU = UK£0.76 or IR£0.80

EUROBAROMETER POLL: The future looks less rosy ...

... even if support for the unification of Western Europe shows consolidation at the very high level of 73%.

Three out of four Europeans are in favour of the unification of Western Europe, only 18% are against it, while 9% "don't know", according to the half-yearly Eurobarometer survey of public opinion in the European Community. The situation has not changed since a year ago, following the fall which took place in 1991, when the percentage of those in favour dropped from 81% to 73%. However, support for membership of the European Union has continued to fall: from 72% in 1990 it fell to 60% six months ago and today stands at 57%. It is much the same thing as regards the benefits one's country has derived from EC membership: in 1990 59% of those polled thought their country had benefitted. Six months ago the figure was down to 47%; it now stands at 45%. Consequently, only 40% of Europeans would regret leaving the Union, as compared to 50% in 1990 and 42% this spring.

Does this mean that nothing is going right for the Europeans today, when everything was fine less than three years ago? True, a good deal has happened in that time: economic crisis, rising unemployment, break-up of the Soviet Union, a political shake-up without precedent in the countries of central and eastern Europe, fighting in the former Yugoslavia, political crisis in the European Community, which almost failed to become the European Union of today, referendums and elections in various member States, where the task of building Europe was less the subject of a genuine debate and more of a pretext for the settling of domestic scores. It is hardly surprising, under the circumstances, that public opinion has been shaken.

The Eurobarometer poll provides confirmation that unemployment is, and by far, the main source of concern for the citizens of the European Union. Only 6% of them believe that the employment situation has improved in their country, as against a massive 77% who think it has worsened. And they do not consider prospects for next year to be much brighter: only 17% expect the employment situation in their country to improve, while 52% expect it to get even worse. The Belgians and Italians are the most pessimistic: 88% of them claim that things are going badly and are worse than last year. The Spaniards are almost as pessimistic (87%), while even the most optimistic, such as the Danes, are not far behind

(65%). The British are not as desperate, but the Greeks are the only veritable exception: only 34% of those polled feel the situation to be difficult, while pessimists amount to a bare 17%. And this perhaps is one of the reasons why Greece is the only country in which Europe finds favour, with 85% of Greeks supporting the unification of Western Europe (an increase of 6 points), 77% consider their country's membership of the European Union to be a good thing (+ 5) and 62% (+ 12) would be very sorry to see their country withdraw from it.

The issue which has really divided public opinion is that of the single currency. While a majority of EU citizens are in favour (51%) rather than opposed (38%), there is significant opposition to a single currency in Denmark (26% for, 69% against), Britain (27% for, 63% against) and Germany (32% for, 58% against). Support for a single currency is highest in Italy, with 80% in favour and a mere 13% against, and Greece (71% for, 14% against). The explanation for this may lie in the distrust of the Germans, on the one hand, for most other European currencies (and monetary policies) and, on the other, of the countries with weak currencies, which prompts their citizens to seek stability in a single currency guaranteed by the strength of the countries which today have the strongest currencies.

No such problems exist as regards the European Central Bank, which enjoys the support of some two-thirds of the citizens. To the question "Should there be a European Monetary Union with a European Central Bank pursuing a policy of monetary stability - that is, fighting inflation?" 64% of those polled responded positively; only 24% were opposed. Enthusiasm was highest among the Italians (84% for, 9% against); but even in the U.K., which is the most reticent in the matter, there was a slight majority in favour, with 45% for and 41% against.

But this is not the only important issue over which public opinion is favourable to the policies needed to bring about a genuine European Union. Thus 69% of Europeans favour a common foreign policy; only 17% are opposed to it. There is an absolute majority in support of such policy in every Member State; it ranges from a high of 76% in Italy and the Netherlands to a "low" of 58% in Britain. Support for a common defense policy is even more widespread, with 77% in favour and just 14% against. In Italy and the Netherlands the proportion of those backing such a policy is a massive 83%. Only in Denmark is public opinion evenly divided, with 47% favouring a common defense policy and 48% opposing it.

The right to vote in one's country of residence in the 1994 elections to the European Parliament is also widely supported: 71% of EU citizens are in favour of it and only 18% oppose it. There are no major differences between the 12 Member States: support is most widespread in the Netherlands (83%), falling to 60% in Greece, at the other end of the spectrum.

The results of the Eurobarometer poll offer proof that, despite a certain distrust, due to a variety of factors and difficulties, Europeans are far from having lost confidence in a European Union which is closer to their needs and their hopes.

SOCIETY: Marriage is in crisis ...

... and the birth rate is the lowest in history in the European Union.

Are Europeans an endangered species? Marriage is in crisis in the European Union and for the first time the fertility rate has fallen below 1.5 children per woman. At this rate the hypothesis that Europeans are headed for extinction, and not in some distant future either, may not be all that far-fetched. In 1980 the average fertility rate was 1.82 children per woman, in 1992 it was down to 1.48. Bearing in mind that the minimum rate at which population reproduces itself is approximately 2.1 children per woman, the writing may be on the wall. Today, only Ireland finds itself above this rate, and even then, only marginally so with 2.11 children per woman - a dramatic fall from 3.23 children of 10 years ago.

This downward trend first showed up on the northern Member States, where it has since slowed down or even turned round. Meanwhile, the situation has deteriorated in the countries of southern Europe, where Spain now holds the record, edging out Italy, with 1.23 children as against 1.26, followed by Greece (1.41) and Portugal (1.48). Things are not much better in the north, and certainly not in Germany (1.30). The decline has been contained in Britain (1.80), while Denmark (1.77) has even recorded a relatively large rise. But in France the decline is continuing, even though the country ranks fourth in Europe with 1.73 children per woman.

Despite this, most women become mothers: at the Community level only some 15% of women between the ages of 35 and 39 do not have children.

... / ...

But more and more of them are living alone. Between 1980 and 1992 the gross marriage rate fell from 6.4 to 5.6 per thousand inhabitants, while the divorce rate rose from 1.4 to 1.6 per thousand. At the same time the number of births outside marriage rose sharply: from 9% to 20%. In Denmark they represent nearly half of all births and roughly one-third in Britain and France.

Women are having fewer children; what is more, they are having them later and later. In 1980 the mean age at birth of first child was 24.6 years, in 1990 it was 26.1 years, with peaks of 27.6 in the Netherlands, 27.3 in Britain and 27 in France.

Society as a whole in fact is undergoing profound change. More and more women are living alone and bringing up children alone, assuming greater responsibility than before. As a result, they are obliged to find the means of doing so; in other words, they are going out to work and therefore having fewer children. The wheel is thus coming full circle, reinforcing the general downward trend in the number of children which traditional households have been experiencing for a long time.

Despite improvements, the condition of women in the European Union still leaves much to be desired. To be simultaneously woman and mother often represents a challenge. Children have a clear impact on the activities of the working woman: the activity rate of mothers aged between 20 and 39 years, with at least one child under five years of age, is 26% below the rate for women in the same age group but with no children. This explains some of the difficulties women face in vocational training and, consequently, in their careers. It also explains why 27.9% of women work part-time as against only 3.9% of men, and why they are harder hit by unemployment than men. The unemployment rate for women is 50% higher than that for men, and even higher in the case of young women.

Not an easy challenge to meet

SOCIAL: Coming shortly - new European works councils?

The ball is now with employers and trade unions.

Do workers employed by multinationals with activities in several European Union countries have the right to "European" information? And if they do, how? These are burning questions in a single market, and at a time of mergers, takeovers and restructuring of all kinds, which can often result in factories being closed down or relocated, with workers being laid off. Early December the European Commission began to consult both employers and trade unions in order to find out if a "European law" was required in this situation.

At present European works councils, or other forms of "European" consultation, exist within some 20 multinational corporations, particularly Bayer and Volkswagen, of German origin, Elf-Acquitaine and Thomson (French), Nestlé (Swiss) and two companies of European parentage, Airbus and Eurocopter. Another 20 or so European multinationals plan to set up information systems on the scale of the single market.

Three years ago the European Commission proposed to the Twelve a directive ("European law") which provided for the information and consultation of workers in multinational companies. The draft law offered a choice between a number of schemes, all of them based on the experiences of different Member States. British opposition to the proposal meant that it failed to secure the unanimous support of the Twelve, essential in this case.

But the agreement on social policy reached by 11 Member States (the Twelve minus Britain), reached at the same time as the Treaty of Maastricht and in force since the same date - 1 November 1993 - offers a way out. The European Commission can propose a "social law" to the Eleven. However, under the Maastricht social agreement, the Commission must first consult both employers and trade unions. It is doing just this: the consultations may take up to three months. In any case, the European Commissioner for social affairs, Pádraig Flynn, has invited EU trade unions and employers to negotiate without delay.