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EUROPEAN COMMUNITY: The "third" Delors Commission starts its 2-year term

The 17 Commissioners, seven of them newcomers, will manage the EC's daily business.

Each of the 17 members of the European Commission is appointed by the government of his country. On December 22 the Commissioners decided just what each of them would do, and they held their first meeting on January 6, to start work on the tasks which fall to the Commission: propose new EC legislation to the Twelve; see that existing Community rules are properly implemented and see to the day-to-day functioning of the Community itself. They will hold office for two years - from 1993 to January 1995 - provided the Treaty of Maastricht is duly ratified by the Twelve. Commission President Jacques Delors was reappointed by the heads of state and government of the Twelve for 1993 and 1994. Under the pre-Maastricht system the Commissioners are appointed for four years; the period will be extended by one year under the system envisaged by "Maastricht" for 1995 and beyond.

The new Commission will be the third to be presided over by France's Jacques Delors; the previous commissions held office from 1985 to 1988 and from 1989 to 1992. The third Delors Commission includes ten former ministers and three former junior ministers; in other words, more than three-fourths of its members have been in government in their countries of origin. This was also the case as regards twelve members of the previous Commission - and it should silence those who insist on describing the members of the European Commission as "bureaucrats" or "technocrats".

All the members of the new Commission have wide experience of the EC: ten of them were already members of the previous Commission while the seven newcomers have wide experience in Community matters: six of them have already taken part, as ministers, in the work of the EC Council of Ministers while the seventh, a career diplomat, has represented his country in the negotiations over the Maastricht Treaty.

Each of the "major" EC countries nominates two commissioners; they are Britain, France, Germany, Italy and Spain. The others nominate one commissioner each. The commissioners are independent, and not under orders from their respective governments. Each of them deals with specific matters, as ministers in the governments of the Member States.

Here is the list of European Commissioners and their portfolios:

Jacques Delors, President: Monetary matters

Henning Christophersen (Denmark): Economic and financial affairs; monetary matters (in agreement with President Delors); credit and investments

Manuel Marín (Spain): Cooperation and development; relations with the countries of the Southern Mediterranean and all developing countries, with the exception of China

Martin Bangemann (Germany): Industrial affairs; information and telecommunications technology

Sir Leon Brittan (U.K.): Economic relations with the developed countries, including the former Soviet Union and China; commercial policy

Abel Matutes (Spain): Energy and transport

Peter Schmidhuber (Germany): Budget; fraud prevention and Cohesion Fund

Christiane Scrivener (France): Customs; taxation and consumer policy

Bruce Millan (U.K.): Regional policy

Karel Van Miert (Belgium): Competition policy

Hans van den Broek (Netherlands): External political relations and security policy. This is a new area of responsibility for the Commission, given it by the Treaty of Maastricht on European Union. The Treaty could come into force during 1993. Also enlargement negotiations with Austria, Finland, Sweden and, perhaps, Norway.

João Deus de Pinheiro (Portugal): Communication, information, culture and audiovisual

Padraig Flynn (Ireland): Questions linked to immigration, internal and judicial affairs - areas of responsibility added by the Treaty of Maastricht; social affairs and employment

Antonio Ruberti (Italy): Science and research; education; training; youth

René Steichen (Luxembourg): Agriculture and rural development

Ioannis Paleokrassas (Greece): Environment; nuclear safety and civil protection; fisheries

Raniero Vanni d'Archirafi (Italy): Internal market; small and medium-sized enterprises; financial institutions.

PHOTOGRAPHY: Where to go for the best buys in cameras and camcorders

Follow your European guide, International Testing, and meet some amazing price differences.

You're dreaming of the latest compact camera, complete with the best zoom lenses and the latest electronic gadgetry? Look for it in Luxembourg or Germany - but stay clear of Italy ... and even more of Portugal. The camera which is priced at 100 (an index number) in the Grand Duchy and at 102 in Munich or Frankfurt (on average) will cost you at least 135 in Italy and 139 in Portugal. Camcorders? The story is much the same. The Luxembourg price is still 100, the German price 105 - but it is a steep 130 in Italy and a record 141 in Portugal. CD players? Germany is ahead of Luxembourg by a whisker - 100 against 101. Denmark is the bloodsucker this time, with an index of 128, ahead of Ireland (125) and Belgium (122). CDs (LPs are museum pieces now) also are cheapest in Germany (with an index of 100, for both modern and classical music). Prices in Luxembourg are reasonable in the case of classical music (102) but somewhat higher for modern music (110). But they are frankly extortionate in France with recordings of modern music priced at 129 and classical music at 124.

These are the results of a survey carried out by International Testing, a body made up of consumer organizations whose aim is to coordinate and promote cooperation between its members on consumer issues, with help from the European Commission's consumer policy department. The survey reveals astonishing price differences. This is particularly the case of the first-ever European camera guide, which provides up-to-date price information and buying tips, along with the results of a vast comparative testing exercise. More than 150 cameras and camcorders are included in the test, organized by International Testing, including compact cameras, single lens reflexes, camcorders as well as 50 mm and zoom lenses, disposable cameras and films. The results of these tests are set out in clear, tabular form, specific to each country.

But there is more to this guide than this. A special table showing prices around the world makes it possible to compare the prices of 24 cameras, both compacts and SLRs, in 14 European countries as well as in Hong Kong, Singapore, Tokyo and New York. What the table shows is that prices in Europe as a whole are twice as high as those in force elsewhere in the world. The city with the lowest prices is New York, followed closely by Hong Kong and Singapore, which is somewhat more expensive.

Thus an Olympus superzoom 110 selling for \$243 in New York costs twice as much in Italy (\$490). Even in Luxembourg, one of the European cities with the lowest prices, it would still cost as much as \$364. But you must go to Hong Kong if you want to buy a Nikon F-601, especially if you are Greek: it will cost you \$589 instead of the \$1,759 you will be asked in Athens. As for the star of them all, the European-made Leica R5, it is cheapest in Hong Kong, even though the price is still a massive \$2,321. But this is significantly lower than the price-tag in Greece (\$4,593) or Italy (\$3,943) - or even in its country of manufacture, Germany (\$3,011).

Of course guarantees will not necessarily be honoured outside the country of purchase and, in the event of a transborder dispute, pursuing legal rights in another country can be time-consuming, expensive and a bureaucratic nightmare. Nevertheless, the game seems to be worth the candle.

- * Which? Guide to Cameras and Camcorders is available from Consumers' Association, P.O. Box 44, Hertford X, SG14 1SH, and costs £2.50. Please contact Brandon Russell (tel. 071-486 55 44).

ENVIRONMENT: For how much longer will the trees hide the wood?

The European Commission's fourth annual report points to a further deterioration in the condition of European forests.

Every fifth tree (22.2%) in the forests of Europe is clearly damaged, with a loss of leaf and/or needle of more than 25% above the normal, as compared to 20.8% in 1990. The European Commission's fourth annual report points to a further deterioration in the condition of Europe's forests.

The vitality of some 83,000 sample trees is assessed in the 12 EC countries as well as in seven non-EC countries (Austria, the Czech and Slovakian Republics, Finland, Hungary, Poland, Sweden and Switzerland) within the framework of the EC forest damage survey and under the national surveys carried out in 33 other countries. The main reason for this deterioration is increased air pollution, which results in a loss of forest vitality through increased acidification of forest soils. Other factors contributing to this deterioration include extreme weather conditions and insect attacks. Conifer species generally show more damage than deciduous trees; this is particularly the case as regards pines, with 27% of trees damaged, and firs (19%). But it is the cork oak which is the species most at risk, with 43% of the trees showing signs of damage. The situation is even more alarming in Central and Eastern Europe: several thousand hectares of forests located in not only industrial areas but also in Czech and Polish mountainous regions have been almost completely wiped out.

It is obvious that should current levels of pollution continue over the long term or, worse yet, should they rise, the very survival of forests over a large part of Europe would be under threat. Just one of the results would be more frequent periods of drought in Europe.

The condition of European forests is such that they require continuous surveillance. The aim must be to not only describe the actual condition of forests but also to throw light on the links between cause and effect. The programs launched by the European Commission and the Economic Commission for Europe have taken up the challenge: in the coming years systematic analyses will be carried out, to complement the data gathered in the framework of the European inventory of forest damage, in hopes of reversing present trends, thus saving the Old World's forest heritage.

CARS: Progress towards a single European market

Manufacturers agree to sell and to publish price lists on a cross-border basis.

In 1993, which is also Year 1 of the single market, European motorists should be able at last to purchase cars without difficulty in another EC country than their own and to compare selling prices in the various EC countries on a reliable basis. The European Commission announced in mid-December that car manufacturers had given two basic undertakings: not to hamper cross-border sales and to publish regularly details of their selling prices in the various EC countries. This was something the Commission had asked them last May.

By mid-December six manufacturers - BMW, Fiat, Ford, Renault, Volkswagen and Volvo - had already written to their dealers to assure them that they could sell to individual buyers or to dealers in other EC countries and that, in such cases, there would be no discrimination, neither as regards delivery dates nor prices. Nor would dealers making cross-border sales be penalized, as had happened in the past. The other car manufacturers have promised the Commission to follow suit.

As for price comparisons, manufacturers will provide the European Commission every six months the basic information which will allow consumers to get some idea of prices: the prices, excluding taxes on the one hand, and including VAT on the other hand, of a standard model for each kind of car, in all EC countries except Denmark and Greece, and with the main options on offer, particularly right-hand drive and automatic gearbox. The Commission, for its part, will forward this information to consumer organizations and the motoring press. Greece and Denmark have been excluded because taxes on cars are very high in these two countries and prices exclusive of taxes are set at exceptionally low levels. As a result, the Community regulation does not require dealers in these countries to engage in cross-border sales at their local prices, exclusive of taxes.

It remains to be seen how these undertakings will be kept in practice - the number of complaints by consumers to the Commission has already fallen off - and how the administrative formalities imposed by the Member States will change.

MEDIA: Safeguarding pluralism

A European Commission Green Paper assesses the need for Community intervention.

Preventing concentration among media companies is the responsibility primarily of the EC Member States, who have adopted rules aimed specifically at ensuring pluralism in the media. These rules vary from country to country, but do not discriminate between EC nationals. In general they limit media ownership by one person. They place limits, for example, on the control of a television channel by a person who already controls another channel (monomedia concentration) and on the acquisition by a newspaper publisher of a stake in a television channel (multi-media concentration).

The European Parliament is nevertheless concerned over the threat to press freedom represented by media concentration. It was in response to numerous requests from Euro-MPs that the European Commission adopted its Green Paper, entitled "Pluralism and media concentration in the single market. An assessment of the need for Community action."

The need for action at the Community level being a complex and sensitive issue, the Commission has preferred, before adopting a position, to consult all the parties concerned and to launch a debate on the basis of a Green Paper.

The Paper therefore does not take a stand on the need for such action but analyses the problems raised and considers various options. The options are: (1) no action at Community level; (2) a recommendation on transparency and (3) harmonization of the laws restricting media ownership. This could be done either by means of a Council directive or regulation.

While it is true that the aim of safeguarding pluralism seems to have been attained at the level of Member States, disparities between national rules could, at least potentially, interfere with the proper functioning of the frontier-free area and prevent media companies from taking full advantage of the opportunities afforded by the internal market and from contributing in this way to pluralism.

All these problems will be looked at during the public hearing which the Commission is organizing in the spring for all interested parties.

CONSUMERS: Towards easier "border-free" payments?

The banks agree to implement the European users' charter.

Since the beginning of the year EC consumers can ask their banks for the European users' charter proposed by the European Commission at the end of March 1992, with a view to making money transfers between Member States both easier and cheaper. Consumers should be able not only to read the charter but also to benefit from it in practice, given that the banking associations in the 12 EC countries have undertaken to implement it, as the European Commission announced in mid-December.

Under the terms of the charter banks must: inform consumers of the various payment methods available to them; let them know in advance how much a given transfer will cost them; allow the sender the possibility of meeting all the costs, so that the beneficiary can receive the sum transferred in full and, finally, in the event of a dispute, allow the user the same procedures as in the case of purely internal transfers. The aim is to arrive at equivalent costs and reliability for all payments made within the EC, whether within the same country or between EC countries.

In order to find out how the banks are implementing the Charter, the European Commission has launched a study which will cover more than 1,000 money transfers. Depending on the results, the Commission will decide whether or not to propose Community legislation to the Member States.

INFLATION: Down in November

But a rise of 3.8% over 12 months.

Last November the price index rose a mere 0.1% for the EC as a whole. Thus from an annual rate of 4% in October the inflation rate fell to 3.8% in November, the lowest since August 1988, according to Eurostat, the EC's statistical office.

Even so, the EC's inflation rate over 12 months remains higher than the American - 3% - and the Japanese - 0.7%. Within the 12-nation Community, inflation was down in all EC countries, since November 1991, except Luxembourg. Annual inflation rates ranged between Denmark's 1.4% and Greece's 15%.