



NEWS ITEMS OF GENERAL INTEREST

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SINGLE MARKET - The EU's invisible frontiers

Three out of four Europeans say they are poorly informed about their rights.

A French woman, recruited and employed in France by a UK-based company as a posted worker for more than three years, needed expensive maternity care in France. She discovered she was not covered for this purpose, under neither the British nor the French health scheme. In another case, a Frenchman who had worked for two years in a British university, was unable to claim health care and unemployment benefits on returning to France.

These are just two of the many examples of difficulties which people have faced in their attempts to take advantage of their rights as European Union (EU) citizens. In both the above cases the EU's Citizens Signpost Service was able to indicate the path that should have been followed. But the fact is that a majority of Europeans is still unaware of its rights, as the latest "Single Market Scoreboard," published recently by the European Commission, makes clear.

As a European citizen you can call a freephone number in all 15 EU countries, order to find out about your rights in all areas of daily life. Depending on the information you want, you can ask for guidebooks - on the possibility of working in another EU country, for example. You can also obtain factsheets dealing with specific topics - such as the recognition of qualifications in Germany or consumer protection in the Netherlands. The freephone numbers are:General information on citizens' rights is to be found on the Internet, at <http://citizens.eu.int/>

You can also call freephone numbers for help with personal problems. In such cases, the Citizens' Signpost Service will give you either the information you need, or the address and telephone number of the competent government department or other body. This service is provided by experts from the European Citizens Action Service (ECAS), a non-profit organization.

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Thanks to the Signpost Service, European leaders have a better idea of the problems which people face most often in their daily lives. The Service has received well over

20,000 enquiries since it was set up in November, 1996; it had analyzed over 17,000 of them by March, 1999. The largest number of enquiries - more than 6,000 of them - dealt with the possibilities of working in another EU country.

Other enquiries handled by the Signpost Service covered living in another EU country, buying goods and services in the European single market and citizens' rights in general in the EU. Together they accounted for nearly half the total enquiries. Callers also wanted to know about the opportunities for studying, training and doing research in another EU country. A small number of questions had to do with travelling in other EU countries and equal rights and opportunities in the 15-nation EU.

In order to find out whether EU citizens know their rights, three surveys were conducted on behalf of the European Commission, the first of them in October, 1997, just before a major, EU-wide publicity campaign on citizens' rights, the second in May, 1998, just after the campaign. The third survey was conducted this April, a month before the Amsterdam Treaty came into force.

In each case, roughly three-quarters of those polled claimed they were not well informed on their rights to live, work and study in the other EU countries. Following the publicity campaign, the proportion of those who felt they were well-informed rose from 17.6% to 22.2% - only to drop to 22% this April.

Clearly, citizens do not know enough about their rights. But they know even less about the administrative procedures they must follow in order to exercise them. The Signpost Service and surveys have revealed another problem: these procedures are often too complicated and civil servants do not explain them in enough detail. Finally, some of these procedures are contrary to EU rules, either overtly or indirectly.

CONSUMERS - The first summer without duty-free sales in the EU...

...is a good deal for taxpayers and acceptable to travellers.

This summer is the first without duty-free cigarettes and whisky inside the 15-nation European Union (EU). Since July 1 people who travel by air or sea between two points within the EU must pay VAT on their purchases at ports, airports and during the journey itself. In addition, they must pay excise duties on alcoholic beverages and tobacco products.

A matter of regret? Well, hardly. The fact is that the absence of duty-free sales represents a good deal for both travellers and taxpayers. Some travellers may have to pay a bit more; but EU taxpayers as a whole stand to gain over EUR 2 billion* a year.

This substantial amount represents the extent to which the treasuries of EU countries and the EU itself have subsidized duty-free shops, by exempting them from the taxes to which all other traders are subject. Despite this, prices in these shops were not always much lower than in high street shops and department stores, except in the case of alcohol and tobacco.

The EU Council of Ministers unanimously decided in 1991 to end duty-free sales in the case of journeys between one EU member state and another. Their decision came into effect on July 1, this year. Duty-free shops took advantage of the transitional period, however, to concentrate more on gifts, luxury items and regional and national specialities. This shift in emphasis, away from alcoholic beverages and cigarettes, is in line with the EU's public health policy, which for several years now has laid down a minimum level of taxation on cigarettes, for example.

Many of the shops that were selling goods duty-free until June 30 have announced that most prices would remain unchanged. And it should be pointed out that an end to duty-free sales leaves intact your right to shop anywhere in the EU without restrictions.

* 1 EUR = UK £0.65 or IR £0.79.

ENVIRONMENT - Our surroundings are becoming worse, despite some progress...

...according to the latest report of the European Environment Agency.

Our environment seems to be turning into a wasteland, leaving us deafened by noise, suffocated by summer smog, invaded by waste, our health undermined by air pollution. This is the picture painted by the latest report of the European Environment Agency, even if it is redeemed somewhat by cleaner rivers, an ozone layer which is recovering and a fall in the emissions of several major pollutants. In recent years the European Union (EU) has introduced "green" regulations and set itself "ecological" goals.

They must now be scrupulously implemented, according to the European Environment Agency. Located in Copenhagen, it has been studying our environment since 1993. Its report points to several unfavourable developments, which include soil deterioration and damage to coastal, rural and mountainous areas. The accumulation of waste and the threat to the diversity of plant and animal life are other sources of preoccupation, even if there have been some improvements in these areas.

The threat which the EU has combated most successfully in recent times has been the depletion of the ozone layer, which protects us from the sun's ultraviolet radiation. Attempts to halt, or at least reduce, the production of the chemical substances which damage the ozone layer have proved successful.

The EU can point to progress in other areas, but it remains inadequate, according to the experts. There is less of the pollution which is responsible for acid rain, which in turn is responsible for the death of forests and, in cities the deterioration of buildings and monuments. Similarly, deposits in rivers of pollutants, such as phosphorous, have fallen, leading to a certain improvement in the situation.

Today most EU countries devote at least 80% of their territory to such economic activities as agriculture, industry and transport as well as to built-up areas, with all the uses to which they are put. These activities will take up even more room in future. The next 10 years should see the construction of another 12,000 km of motorways, while an equal amount of land would be given over to housing, because of a 5% increase in the urban population.

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The report warns that our environment is going to be subject to enormous pressures in the coming years, particularly as regards global warming, dangerous chemical substances and waste.

The experts forecast increased emissions of the gases responsible for the greenhouse effect, and their concentration in the atmosphere, until the year 2050. Carbon dioxide emissions are expected to rise by 45%, of methane by 80%. Sea levels and temperatures will rise at the same time.

Emissions of dangerous chemical substances, and more particularly of mercury, cadmium and copper, should rise over the next 10 years. Another cause for concern is the fact that we do not have enough scientific information to be able to assess the risks to the environment of some three-quarters of the chemical substances produced and sold on a large scale in the EU. However, thanks to EU policies, pollution by substances such as lead and biphenyls should decline.

When it comes to waste, the EU has failed to reach its targets, despite northern Europe's success with recycling. Waste production and disposal is expected to rise even further in the coming years.

SOCIETY - One in five Europeans is below the poverty line

Finland is the most egalitarian EU country; Ireland, Greece and Portugal are less egalitarian.

Nearly one in five inhabitants of the European Union (EU) was living below the poverty line in 1994. The poorest 20% of the population received just 8% of the total income, the richest 20% almost 40% of it, or five times as much. This, in a nutshell, was the situation at the level of income distribution in the 15-nation EU.

It is set out in a statistical pocketbook, entitled "Living Conditions in Europe," published recently by the European Commission and the EU's statistical office, Eurostat. In 1994 - which is the latest year for which we have comparable data - the income of 18% of the EU's inhabitants was some 60% below the median income of their country of residence. In other words, they were living below the poverty line. Median income is half-way between the highest and lowest incomes.

The proportion of the population living below the poverty line varied a good deal from one EU country to another. It ranged from 9% in Finland and 10% in the Netherlands to 22% in Ireland and 24% in Portugal. Single parents with children were the hardest hit, with 35% of them living below the poverty line in the EU as a whole. But here, too, there were substantial differences between member states: one went from 8% in Denmark and Finland to 51% in the UK and 56% in Ireland.

Income distribution at the individual level also varied a great deal from one EU country to another. Thus 20% of the poorest enjoyed only 6% of the national income in Portugal, while the corresponding figure for Finland was almost twice as high at 11%. At the same time, while the richest 20% accounted for 44% of the national income in Portugal, they received just 33% of it in Denmark and Finland.

Eurostat experts have been using a special index to measure income inequality: the higher the index, the greater the level of inequality in the country in question. As a result, they were able to designate Finland as the most egalitarian of EU countries, followed by Denmark and Sweden. At the other end of the scale was Portugal, followed closely by Ireland and Greece.

Income is not the only measure of poverty; it is also reflected in your ability to pay your bills and to buy the things you feel to be important. Here it is the way you view your situation which counts. Six percent of Europeans, for example, felt they could not afford to eat meat or fish every other day. But this figure rose to 37% in the case of Greece, whereas it was below 10% everywhere else.

Similarly, 14% of the EU's inhabitants claimed they were not in a position to buy new clothes. At one end of the scale were Portugal (49%) and Greece (35%), at the other, Denmark and Luxembourg (4% in each case). While nearly one in three European households claimed it could not afford a week's annual holiday away from home, the proportion was well above 50% in the case of Portugal, Sweden and Greece, but below 15% in Germany, Luxembourg and the Netherlands.

Nine percent of EU households were unable to pay their rent on time in 1995. This was the case as regards more than one in three Greek households and one in five Irish households. That same year 5% of households were unable to pay their electricity, water or gas bills. Nearly one in three Greek households found itself in this situation. Single parents with children were especially likely to face this problem.

HEALTH - Young Europeans smoke more than their elders

40% of smokers over 60 years of age are bothered by health problems.

There is bad news for Europeans on the health front: young people - those aged 15 to 34 years - smoke more than their elders in the European Union (EU). As many as 37% of those in this age group smoked every day, as against 29% of Europeans aged 15 years and above, in 1995, the latest year for which detailed figures are available. This information is contained in the statistical pocketbook, "Living Conditions in Europe," published recently by the European Commission and the EU's statistical office, Eurostat. The volume also notes that 40% of Europeans over 60 years of age are bothered by chronic health problems in their daily lives.

Greece holds the record when it comes to regular smokers: 39% percent of Greeks are in this category. It is followed by Denmark, France, the Netherlands, Belgium and Spain; all of them are above the EU average. Ireland is just on it, while Luxembourg, Austria and the UK are just below it, followed by Germany and Italy, then Portugal and Sweden and, finally, Finland, which has the lowest proportion of regular smokers in the EU - 20%, or half the figure for Greece.

Men are more prone than women to smoke, in nearly all EU countries. Sweden is the one exception; here women lead the way by a large margin. In Luxembourg, cigarettes attract both sexes in equal numbers.

With 50%, France holds the record when it comes to young people aged 15 to 34 years. However, Denmark and Greece are not far behind. At the other end of the scale are Sweden (19%), Finland (26%) and Italy (27%).

One can stop smoking, but not ageing. Some 40% of Europeans over 60 years of age were bothered by chronic health problems in their daily lives in 1995, according to the Eurostat pocketbook. These problems seriously hampered 18% of Europeans in this age group in their activities, and bothered "to some extent" another 22% of them.

This seemed to be the case more particularly in France and Sweden. In these two countries nearly 25% of those over 60 years of age claimed to be seriously hampered in their activities by health problems. Luxembourg was at the other end of the scale, with just 10%.

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