



NEWS ITEMS OF GENERAL INTEREST

*Information newsletter published by the European Commission.
Articles of immediate interest to readers, ready for publication.*

Weekly No. 26/99

20 –27 July 1999

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REGIONAL AID: 23% of Europeans will have priority in 2000-2006**Many others will benefit from European Union aid.**

Just over 86 million people in the 15-nation European Union (EU) - or 23% of the EU's total population, and more than the population of Germany - will receive the lion's share of the regional and social aid to be extended by the EU between 2000 and 2006. It will amount to EUR 127.5 billion*, and the list of regions which will benefit from it was drawn up by the European Commission in early July.

The Commission decided at the same time on the sums to be allocated by country and type of support for the other forms of regional and social aid, within the regulatory framework already established by the EU Council of Ministers**. The total volume of the aid in question comes to EUR 213 billion, and for the EU as a whole it will amount to EUR 26.2 billion a year on average over the period 2000-2006, as compared to EUR 24.1 billion a year between 1994 and 1999, under the current aid programme.

The regional and social aid extended by the EU is used to develop, or redevelop, regions that are lagging behind, by financing public facilities and encouraging those who are the most vulnerable in the face of unemployment to undergo vocational training. The 23% of Europeans who will be given priority in the allocation of this aid are living in regions whose production of wealth per inhabitant, as measured by gross domestic product, is less than 75% of the average for the EU as a whole. (They are the so-called Objective 1 regions).

South Yorkshire, West Wales and the Valleys, Cornwall and the Scilly Isles, and Merseyside all fall within this category, as do Ireland's Border Midlands and Western areas; East Germany, minus the former East Berlin; all of Greece; the 10 regions of Spain located in the west and in the southern half of the country, as well as the Canary Islands. Also in this category are France's overseas departments; southern Italy, minus Molise; Austria's Burgenland; all of Portugal, with the exception of the Lisbon-Tagus valley area, and three very thinly populated areas in Finland and an equal number in Sweden.

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The category of priority regions is somewhat smaller, given that it contains 25% of the population between 1994 and the end of 1999. However, the regions which will no longer be entitled to the maximum assistance between 2000 and 2006, because they have become more prosperous meanwhile, will receive special assistance until 2005, for a total amount of EUR 8.4 billion. Areas benefitting from this transitional support will include Northern Ireland, for example, as well as parts of Ireland, given that the entire country is covered during the 1994-1999 period.

The second category of areas likely to receive regional development aid between 2000 and 2006 will account for 18% of the EU's total population, or roughly 67.5 million in all, as against more than 25% under the current programme. (They are the so-called Objective 2 regions.) This category will receive EUR 19.7 billion, with an additional EUR 2.7 billion for those areas which would no longer be entitled in principle to this aid from next year. Included in this category are areas in all EU countries, except Ireland, Greece and Portugal. In addition, a sum of EUR 1.1 billion is being provided for areas and activities linked to fishing, outside the most disadvantaged regions.

The Objective 2 regions are a very diverse group. What these regions have in common, however, is the need to redevelop, in order to overcome their difficulties, beginning with unemployment. More than half the population of these regions is to be found in industrial areas which have been hard hit by job losses, resulting from the closure of collieries and steel mills, for example. Other regions in need of redevelopment include rural areas threatened by underemployment and depopulation; inner city areas affected by unemployment and poverty, and coastal regions dependent on fishing, a sector with rising job losses.

From 2000 to 2006 the EU will in addition help finance educational and vocational training programmes in order to prevent and combat unemployment and social exclusion. This will be done independently of all regional priorities and through a special mechanism. These programmes form part of the overall aid programme. A total of EUR 24 billion has been allocated for these activities in the 12 countries in question.

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In early July the European Commission shared out among the beneficiary countries the sums devoted to each type of action: aid to priority regions, help with the redevelopment of areas in difficulty, the development of vocational training, and support for areas dependent on fishing.

Finally, Community initiatives. These are specialized programmes which finance, at the level of the EU, projects which can serve as examples across the EU. Funds have also been allocated to these Community initiatives. The lion's share - over EUR 4.8 billion - has been allocated to INTERREG, which for several years now has been helping border areas to work together. EQUAL, which will combat discrimination in access to jobs, will receive EUR 2.85 billion. LEADER will continue to promote rural development; it will receive more than EUR 2 billion. URBAN has been allocated EUR 700 million; its task is to help regenerate rundown urban areas.

Regularly updated information on the EU's regional and social aid programmes can be found on the Internet at <http://inforegio.cec.eu.int>

* 1 EUR = UK £0.65 or IR £0.79.

HEALTH: Antibiotics are medicines!

The European Union wants to combat antibiotic resistance.

European scientists sounded the alarm this spring. They warned that the use of antibiotics in livestock farming, except on the advice of a veterinary surgeon, can pose a threat to the health of consumers*. In other words, the fact of eating meat treated with antibiotics can result in resistance to antibiotics, when taken in case of illness. In order to prevent this, the EU Council of Ministers has concluded that an overall strategy is needed, the broad outlines of which are set out in a recent Council resolution.

The aim, to begin with, is to assess the risks and to undertake preventive action. The resolution therefore calls for EU-wide coordination of the surveillance of antibiotic

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resistance in humans and animals, the monitoring and control of antibiotic usage and the development of new preventive medicines. In addition, a concerted effort is needed to provide training aimed at encouraging the prudent use of antibiotics, in medicine as well as in farming.

European research has an important role to play, in developing not only new antibiotics and alternatives to them but also farming practices aimed at improving animal health. EU health ministers want EU research to study the transmission of resistance to antibiotics.

They have also called on the national authorities to work together, in order to alert all those involved, particularly farmers and veterinary surgeons, to the problem of antibiotic resistance, and to promote livestock farming methods which are less dependent on antibiotics.

* See Eurofocus 22/99

SINGLE CURRENCY: 61% of Europeans are for the euro...
...while 28% are against it, according to a recent poll.

Three months after the launch of the euro on January 1, six out of 10 European Union (EU) citizens claimed to be for the new currency: 61% of them were in favour of it, while 28% opposed it, in the EU as a whole. Approval was even more evident in the euro area, which is made up of the 11 EU countries that adopted the single currency on January 1*. Here 68% of those polled were for the euro, and just 22% against it.

These are among the results of the latest Eurobarometer opinion poll, carried out in the 15 EU countries between March 12 and May 4 of this year, and published in early July as "Eurobarometer No. 51."

The euro's standing in European eyes was somewhat lower this spring than last autumn. Even so, it remained higher than in all the opinion polls conducted since 1993. This is the year in which the Maastricht Treaty, which provides for the introduction of a single currency on 1 January 1999, came into force

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The spring opinion poll showed a majority in favour of the euro in all EU countries except the UK, Denmark and Sweden. None of the three adopted the single currency on January 1. The UK in fact is the only country in which more than half those polled were hostile to the euro. However, in Greece, the fourth EU country which remains outside the euro area for the present, some two-thirds of those polled were for the single currency.

Enthusiasm for the euro was greatest in Luxembourg and Italy, with more than 80% in favour of it. They were followed by Belgium, Ireland, the Netherlands, Spain, France and Greece. Countries below the EU average were Portugal, Finland, Germany and Austria.

In the 11-nation euro area as a whole, more than half those polled this spring felt they were well informed about the single currency, as compared to just 38% last autumn. The corresponding figure for the 15-nation EU as a whole was 45% this spring. Not surprisingly, perhaps, among those who claimed to be well informed about the euro, its supporters largely outnumbered its opponents.

Nearly nine out of ten people in the euro area noted they had received information on the euro, as against eight out of ten people in the EU as a whole. Television was the first source of information, followed by banks and savings banks. Newspapers and magazines were in third place. While television played the leading role in nearly all EU countries, banks and savings banks led in Ireland, France and the Netherlands.

For the time being the euro exists in our daily lives only in the form of bank accounts and payments by cheque, bank card and bank transfers. Euro notes and coins will make their appearance only on 1 January 2002; they will have completely replaced national notes and coins by 1 July 2002 at the latest.

* Austria, Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain.

SOCIETY: Violence against children and women remains rather widespread**An opinion poll shows how it is perceived by Europeans.**

Violence against children and women in the home is not limited to distant countries. Nor is it the work of a handful of mentally disturbed men and women, or of criminals, as some cases in recent years may lead one to think. European Union (EU) citizens in fact believe that domestic violence against children and women is an all too common phenomenon in their country, according to the Eurobarometer public opinion poll, conducted this spring and published in early July as Eurobarometer No. 51.

Those who took part in the survey also believed that the EU must join the fight against these scourges. Nearly eight out of ten Europeans held that violence against children is very, or at any rate fairly, widespread in their country. This was particularly the case in Italy, France and the Netherlands, where 85% and over of those polled held this view. Next were Belgium, the UK and Portugal; all three were above the EU average. While Denmark and Finland were at the other end of the spectrum, even so nearly six out of ten people believed violence towards children to be widespread.

As for violence against women in the home, nearly three out of four Europeans held that it is fairly widespread in their country. The highest percentages (80% and above) were recorded in Spain, Italy and Portugal as well as in the UK and Ireland. Greece was also above the EU average. Countries below it included France and Sweden, followed by Belgium, the Netherlands, Austria, Germany, Finland and Luxembourg. Only in Denmark were the two sides evenly balanced, with 49% of those polled taking the view that violence against women was not very, or even not at all, common in their country.

Some nine out of ten Europeans took the view that the EU must join in the fight against domestic violence directed against children and women.

**PUBLIC OPINION: Europeans knew about their Parliament before the elections...
...but not about the European Union budget.**

How familiar are you with the European Union (EU)? If the subject is the European Parliament, nine out of ten Europeans have heard about it. But most people have only a vague idea of how the EU spends their money; their knowledge of the EU budget is largely non-existent.

These are among the findings of the Eurobarometer public opinion poll, conducted between March 12 and May 4 this year, and published as "Eurobarometer No. 51." Given its timing, it was only natural that nearly all EU citizens had heard of the European Parliament, elections to which were held on June 13. The proportion of positive answers ranged from 99% in Denmark to 86% in the UK and Germany.

As many as 69% of those polled stated they intended to vote in the elections to the European Parliament on June 13. A month or two later, just 49% actually did so. In some countries, such as Denmark, the Netherlands, Portugal, Finland and the UK, the gap between people's declared intentions and what actually did was breathtaking.

The general public is less well informed about the other EU institutions. Thus 79% of those polled claimed to have heard of the European Commission, 70% of the European Central Bank, which manages the euro, and 63% of the EU Council of Ministers and the European Court of Justice. EU legislation is adopted by the Council, on its own or with the European Parliament, while the Court, based in Luxembourg, interprets this legislation in cases brought before it, and checks on the actions of other EU bodies.

Only 47% of those polled knew of the Court of Auditors; seldom in the limelight, the Court checks on how the EU spends its income. This figure dropped to 34% when it came to the Economic and Social Committee, which represents the various social categories and associations, and to 31% for the European ombudsman, the mediator in disputes between citizens and businesses, on the one hand, and the EU's administrative bodies on the other. The Committee of the Regions, which represents the EU's regions, provinces and Länder, came last with just 28%.

The EU budget was revealed as something of a blank in most people's mind, even though the EU's financial resources are provided by the taxpayer, particularly through VAT. Those polled thought that a quarter of the EU's budget goes on the salaries of its officials, buildings and meetings, and that it is the most important item of EU expenditure. The fact is that these administrative costs account for just 5% of total expenditure.

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There was also a tendency to overestimate aid to East European and developing countries. It accounts for 6% of the budget, and not 11% as public opinion would have it.

There was a tendency to underestimate spending on agriculture and regional and social aid, which together account for much of the EU's expenditure. The common agricultural policy will account for 42% of the EU budget this year, and not 17% on average as claimed by those polled. Regional and social aid accounts for 41% of the budget, and not 14%, the average estimate of those taking part in the poll.

UNEMPLOYMENT: It fell by 300,000 in the EU as a whole in May...
...to stand at 9.4%, as compared to 9.5% in April.

There was a slight drop in unemployment in the European Union (EU) in May to 9.4%, as against 9.5% the previous month, according to Eurostat, the EU's statistical office. The number of unemployed in the EU as a whole declined to 16 million, as against 16.3 million in April, on the basis of International Labour Office (ILO) definitions.

Unemployment remained lowest in Luxembourg at 2.8%, which put it ahead of the Netherlands (3.3% in April), Austria (4.3%), Portugal (4.7%) and Denmark (4.7% in April). Next were the UK (6.3% in March), Ireland and Sweden (6.8%), Belgium (9%) and Germany (9.1%). Countries above the EU average included Finland (10.5%), France (11.2%), Italy (12% in April) and Spain (16.2%). There were no recent figures for Greece.

Please contact us by fax or e-mail if you would like copies of the documents used in the preparation of Eurofocus articles.

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