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Mailed from Brussels X

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SOCIETY: Which Europe on the eve of the third millennium?

A European Commission report looks at the demographic problems facing the EU.

With its 350 million inhabitants - to which must now be added the 20 million Austrians, Swedes and Finns - the European Union is the third largest demographic power in the world, after China (1.2 billion) and India (900 million), but ahead of the Independent States of the former Soviet Union (290 million) and the United States (255 million). The key problem facing the EU is that of an ageing population, with all that this implies for the structure of European society. Indeed, the population report which the European Commission adopted recently at the initiative of Commissioner Pádraig Flynn, takes a close look at this problem.

The two main reasons for an ageing European population are (1) lower fertility rates and (2) increased life expectancy. The fertility rate in 1992 was 1.48 children for the EU as a whole, as compared to 2.61 children in 1960. As a result, the base of the age pyramid has been shrinking. At the same time life expectancy has been rising, so that the proportion of elderly people has been going up. The combination of these two developments has resulted in the European Union having the highest proportion of people over 65 years of age in the world - 15%, as compared to 13% in the United States and Japan, 6% in China and 4% in other developing countries. Life expectancy at birth now stands at 72.9 years for men and 79.5 years for women in the EU. This is some 10 years more than in the developing countries. And for several years now life expectancy in the EU has been rising at the rate of one year every 4 to 5 years.

This undeniable advance in the human condition nevertheless requires far-reaching changes in the economic and social organization of society, especially as regards employment, work and leisure time. In just a little more than a century the number of hours worked by an urban worker has fallen from roughly 4,000 hours a year - without free evenings, week-ends off, holidays and retirement - to approximately 1,600 hours. The worker in fact has more free time than working hours. While this represents an extraordinary rise in living standards, it is not without problems. Thus the social security system must face steadily rising costs with, at the end of the day, the need to delay the age of retirement in an infernal

spiral of rising unemployment, particularly among the young, with the consequent postponement of their autonomy and, therefore, their integration into society. The family, which still plays a key role in maintaining social balance, has also been affected and is changing more profoundly with each passing day, with more cohabiting couples, more single parent families, more children being born outside marriage (from 0.5% per 100 live births in 1960 to 20 in 1992) and the development of the "family-as-a-pact". These are no longer exceptional situations, while one-person households now account for 26% of all households.

Developments in the EU have been very different from those in North America or Australia, for example. Compared to these countries the EU has helped bring about greater life expectancy and lower infant mortality rates. Compared to Japan, it has ensured greater equality among its citizens. But these achievements will now have to be safeguarded in the face of a new demographic situation.

Eurofocus will discuss the report in greater detail in a future issue.

HEALTH: Reassuring the public that blood products are safe in Europe

Because of AIDS the public is suspicious of transfusions. The European Commission has drawn up a strategy to restore confidence.

Europeans are rather well-informed on the subject of blood. As many as 98% of them know of the existence of the different blood groups; 90% know that donating blood does not result in a permanent loss of blood from the body while 89% are aware that whole blood donations are tested, according to a Eurobarometer survey. One European in two considers donating blood to be a civic duty; 33% are ready to donate blood for a relative or friend, 30% in the event of a disaster, 26% before an operation and 25% because of the rarity of a given blood group. The vast majority of Europeans (78%) take the view that blood which has been donated must be made available free of charge to those who need it; only 13% believe a charge should be made, in order to cover the costs of collecting, testing and distributing the blood, although another 6% favour an additional payment, aimed at covering the costs of research and publicity, and to pay for blood donation campaigns.

Europeans are reasonably well-informed, therefore; there is a majority in fact in favour of blood donations and free transfusions. Even so, the scandal of AIDS-contaminated blood, which made the headlines throughout Europe, has shaken their confidence in the safety of blood products. The fact is that, because of AIDS, 70% of Europeans are more suspicious today than 10 years ago when it comes to the safety of blood and blood products. 27% of them are afraid to donate blood, while 73% fear having to undergo a transfusion. The Portuguese (51%) and Spaniards (41%) are the most numerous as regards the fear of donating blood, while 87% of Italians are terrified at the thought of a blood transfusion.

One of the consequences of this phobia of infection through contaminated blood is a European blood shortage, because of a shortage of donors. As it happens, the EU has set itself the goal of self-sufficiency in blood products - quite simply for reasons of safety. This does not mean that blood supplies imported from non-EU countries are necessarily less safe; but the tests and checks carried out in these countries are not always the same as those used in the EU and occasionally are less well known. To reach the goal of self-sufficiency, it is necessary to restore the confidence of Europeans in the quality and safety of the entire blood chain in Europe and to encourage them to donate blood. It is with this end in view that the European Commission has drawn up a strategy, which will be implemented in collaboration with the Member States.

As a first step it is necessary to ensure that blood is collected under conditions which guarantee its safety. This involves developing reliable scientific policies and checks which are similar in all EU countries. Effective and valid tests for tracking down infections will have to be introduced everywhere. Another important feature of this strategy has to do with keeping the public informed. The Eurobarometer survey has shown, for example, that people generally do not know how often they can donate blood. The Commission plans, therefore, to support information campaigns in the Member States, in order both to familiarize people with questions of transfusions and to alert them to the fact that the blood they give will save lives. Finally, a system for gathering epidemiological data relating to the blood transfusion chain is to be set up. It will make it possible to keep a watch on the appearance or evolution of epidemics due to transfusions, thus serving both as a warning network in the event of a problem and as a tool for studying the causes of these illnesses and of how to keep them from spreading.

ENVIRONMENT: To make drinking water safer ...

... the European Commission proposes reducing its lead content.

In order to protect people's health, particularly that of young children, the European Commission is proposing that the maximum authorized lead content of drinking water be reduced by 80% - from 50 micrograms per litre to 10. This is the chief modification which it is asking the Member States to make to the 1980 "European law" on drinking water.

The Commission has set the new norms on the basis of work done by the World Health Organization (WHO). Their adoption will involve changes to pipes at a cost of more than ECU 50 billion*, according to the best available estimates. Roughly 80% of this amount would be needed to replace pipes within the houses themselves. The lead pipes which are to be found in the older city centres in particular date from the time of the first industrial revolution.

But this does not mean that the new "law" proposed by the Commission will require owners to change pipes overnight. The lead content which would be specified, if the law is adopted, would apply to the water supply system and to public buildings. The measures applicable to private dwellings would be set out by each Member State in the context of its own legislation. In any case, lead pipes would be replaced as and when houses were renovated.

The Commission is seeking to do more than make drinking water safer, however; it also wants to simplify the existing law. It is proposing that the number of parameters which must be met be reduced from 67 to 48. However, 13 of the 48 are new, and take into account recent scientific progress.

EU governments will have to notify consumers the moment standards are not being respected. In addition, they will have to submit each year - instead of every three years - a report on the implementation of the directive.

* 1 ECU = UK£0.79 or IR£0.79.

TELECOMS: Will multimedia services soon be delivered to homes by cable?

The European Commission is drafting a "law" aimed at removing the obstacles.

Visit a shopping centre without leaving the house; look through catalogues or property advertisements; reserve seats on trains and airplanes; buy theatre tickets; order merchandise - and all this while sitting before your television or computer screen: these are just some of the services which will be available at a reasonable price to tens of millions of Europeans, once the new computerized multimedia services can use the cable television network. And making this possible is the aim of a directive ("European law") recently proposed by the European Commission.

These new computerized communication services require, in order to reach private homes and flats, a large carrying capacity which traditional telecom networks, such as those used for old-fashioned telephones, for example, do not have. The need for a large carrying capacity is particularly important for services which involve moving images.

Cable television networks are very well-placed for delivering these services, without it being necessary practically to modify existing lines. The fact is that on the one hand they reach into homes - which is not the case as regards the railway or electricity networks - and, on the other, have the necessary capacity for carrying images in movement - and for good reason! What is more, in the European Union everyone theoretically has the right to supply these famous computerized "new services".

The problem is that national laws and regulations often ban the use of cable television networks for the "new" telecom services. This is the case as regards Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Spain and Portugal. In France services which do not involve the voice are allowed; in the Netherlands cable networks can be used to a limited extent by new services. Ireland and Luxembourg have no regulations in the matter. Greece and Italy simply do not have cable television. Only the UK -

as well as Sweden among the EU's new Member States - specifically authorize the use of cable television networks.

It is in Luxembourg that the cable network reaches the largest number of homes - 99.5%; however, the largest number of subscribers to cable television is to be found in Belgium - 95.5% of homes - while 97.4% of homes can be reached by it. Cable television can reach 90.3% of homes in the Netherlands, 73.6% in Denmark, 64.6% in Germany, more than 50% in Ireland and 25.8% in France. The proportion falls to 12.6% in the UK, 8.1% in Spain and 1.6% in Portugal.

The number of cable television companies varies a good deal from one country to another: from 6,500 in Denmark to 358 in the Netherlands ... and to just one - it amounts to a virtual monopoly - in Germany and Portugal.

The European Commission can adopt on its own the directive on the use of cable television networks for the new telecom services. But it wanted to consult all interested parties first in order to secure a favourable opinion on the whole from as many Member States and Euro-MPs as possible. The European Parliament in fact has already adopted a resolution in favour of the liberalization of networks. As for the Member States, the majority of them support such a move in Germany, France and the UK in particular. However, it is opposed by Belgium and Denmark. The Commission intends introducing the forthcoming legislation on 1 January 1996.

Access to cable networks for the new telecom services should lead to a fall in the cost to subscribers of existing services, and ensure reasonable rates for new ones. The fact is that in the pre-1995 EU, national telecom companies have been renting their lines at rates 10 times higher on average than those in force in countries which have already liberalized cable television networks, such as Sweden and the United States.

ENVIRONMENT: The Commission mobilizes itself over "green" book-keeping ... which seeks to show people and companies the damage to the environment and the efforts to prevent it.

During the European summit, held in Essen last December, the heads of state or government of the European Union came out in support of a new development model. The aim is to create the conditions needed for sustainable economic development, one which will improve the competitiveness of businesses in the long term and make it possible to create jobs which meet a genuine need and are not fated to disappear within a year or two. A key element of this strategy is the safeguard of natural resources, in order to be able to hand over to future generations a healthy environment, with a potential for development comparable to the one available to us.

To this end it is necessary that both public opinion and business become aware of the damage caused to the environment by certain growth models and of the needs to fight against this environmental degradation. Europe-wide statistics are needed, however, in order to be able to follow the changes to our natural resources. This in fact is the goal of the system of green book-keeping which the European Commission has decided to introduce. A guide to the European system of integrated economic and environmental book-keeping will serve as a point of reference, thus ensuring that the statistics gathered in the various EU countries are comparable, while common performance indicators will be adopted. This system will make it possible to identify the level of performance in the Member States, both in economic terms and in terms of the environmental impact. The sums spent in each EU country on environmental protection will also be noted, along with the cost of the damage which has occurred as well as the cost of repairing it.

The full results of this green book-keeping at the EU level will be known in two years' time. These statistics will then be used to redefine the guidelines for sectoral policies, for example, in transport, energy and agriculture.

CULTURE: The strong impact of the "European cities of culture"

A report concludes that the operation has been a success.

Since 1985 the European Commission each year supports the organization of cultural activities in a European city designated by the Council of the European Union. Lisbon was chosen last year as the "European city of culture"; this year's choice is Luxembourg. It will be the turn of Copenhagen next year. The Danish capital will be followed by Thessaloniki in 1997, Stockholm in 1998 and Weimar in 1999. In order to assess the activities undertaken in the framework of the European cities of culture programme (10 cities so far), on the one hand and, on the other, of the "European cultural months", the European cities of culture and the European Commission jointly financed a report which concluded that the operation had been a success. Some ECU 210 million* in all were invested, around 20% of it by business, and had a strong impact on tourism and the role of culture in everyday life. According to the report, the organization of European cities of culture encouraged cities to exercise their imagination and creativity.

The organization of European cities of culture, as well as costs, sources of funds, artistic programmes, media coverage, social impact and economic importance are all analyzed in detail in the report. "This study contributes to an awareness of the value and impact of culture on our societies. The report on the whole provides a very positive assessment of the "European cultural month", another of the European Commission's initiatives, aimed in this case at supporting, during a full month, cultural activities in a European country which is not a member of the European Union.

The report, "European cities of culture and European cultural months", is available in full in English and in summary form in French and Portuguese. A copy can be had by writing to the European Commission, Directorate-General X/D/1, 200 rue de la Loi, B-1049 Brussels, Belgium.

* 1 ECU = UK£0.79 or IR£0.79