

I.

Conservatives give in

The new European Commission is to start work, following the agreement of the European Parliament to approve it. The go-ahead followed the Buttiglione affair, and the decision by the European People's Party MEPs to drop their opposition to the Hungarian commissar, László Kovács. A life-long servant of the Central Committee of the Hungarian Communist Party, Kovács had shown himself during the hearings to be completely incompetent. Initially the "conservative" MEPs had argued that they deserved Kovács's scalp in compensation for the Socialist victory against Buttiglione. But now they have decided that they want to strengthen José Manuel Durrao Barroso, the ex-Maoist President of the Commission, since he now counts as a right-winger. The only protests are now coming from the Greens, who have it in for Nellie Kroes, the Dutch commissar who failed to declare that she was a lobbyist for Lockheed Martin. They are also opposed to the replacement for Buttiglione, the serving Foreign Minister of Italy, Franco Frattini, whom they reproach for having worked with Silvio Berlusconi on his judicial reform. Barroso has himself started to complain about the fact that he does not get to choose his own commissars (they are appointed by the member states). He said it was rather like "blind date". [Martin Halusa, *Die Welt*, 15th November 2004]

Summit with Russia postponed

The Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, has tried to play down the fact that a summit between Russia and the EU has been delayed for two weeks. The meeting, which is now due to take place on 25th November, instead of 11th November, had initially been postponed indefinitely, on Moscow's request. The reason given was that the Russians wanted to wait for the new European Commission to be confirmed in office, so that they would know with whom they would be dealing. But many believed that the postponement was evidence of a deep crisis in relations between Moscow and Brussels. Lavrov expressed some annoyance at the apparent belief that the Russians were afraid of meeting their EU interlocutors. But it is true that the Russians are chafing at the association arrangements which the EU applies to them, which they say are worse than those

offered to Ukraine and Morocco (i.e. comparable non-EU states which border the Union). There are also disagreements about Russia's role in Moldova and the Caucasus, where small detachments of Russian troops remain. The EU is also opposed to what it says are subsidised gas prices for domestic consumers in Russia. It claims that this is an unfair subsidy which distorts competition, especially in energy intensive sectors like petro-chemicals, steel and aluminium production. Russia is also dissatisfied with the arrangements for the transit of goods between Kaliningrad, which lies between Poland and Lithuania. Viacheslav Pavlovski, an official in the Russian Foreign Ministry, has said that he hopes it will be possible to agree to visa-free travel between Russia and the EU by the end of the decade. [Manfred Quiring, *Die Welt*, 13th November 2004]

Turkosceptics harden their position

With one month to go before the European Council is due to approve the Commission's recommendation to open accession negotiations with Turkey, those countries which are against Turkish membership have been hardening their line. The French President, Jacques Chirac, who supports the admission of Turkey, has said that a third possibility should be explored, in case the accession negotiations fail. "There are three solutions," said Chirac. "It might all work and Turkey might really subscribe to all our values. That will take ten or fifteen years. If on the other hand Turkey cannot or does not want to make the necessary efforts, then we will stop. But there is a third hypothesis, namely that in three, four, five years we realise that we have made progress but that there are still obstacles to be overcome. We would then have to find another solution, the creation of a sufficiently strong bond which would satisfy our ambitions for peace and co-operation, without being full integration into the EU." This is precisely the policy – some kind of special partnership, but not full membership – which the German Christian Democrats have suggested, and which the Turkish Government has angrily rejected. But if this possibility were to be included in the European Council's decision in December, then it would represent the rejection of the principle of Turkish membership which was formally accepted in 1999

and confirmed in 2002 in Copenhagen. This is clearly what the opponents of Turkish membership want. The Netherlands, which currently holds the presidency of the EU, might play an interesting role because there has been a recent upsurge in hostility there towards Muslims, following the assassination of an anti-Muslim film director.

Cyprus is also stiffening its opposition to Turkey. Turkey does not recognise the government of Cyprus. The Cypriot President, Tassos Papadopoulos, has called on Turkey to show, by 17 December (the date of the European Council meeting), in word and in deed, that "she understands and accepts and understands that the EU is composed of 25 members and that each stage requires a positive vote by each one of them." This is simply a way of saying that Cyprus is ready to veto Turkish membership, even though the Greek Cypriots are "in principal" favourable to it. They want Turkey to recognise them as the government of Cyprus and to withdraw her troops from the Northern part of the island. They also want the end to Turkish embargoes on their trade. The Cypriots have not yet made these things a formal condition for agreeing to Turkish membership, but diplomatic sources in Brussels say they are on the point of doing so. [Arnaud Leparmentier, *Le Monde*, 15th November 2004]

Greeks cheated

European Finance Ministers are trying to work out what to do in the light of fact that it has now been proved that Greece falsified their national accounts in order to get into the eurozone. The Greek Finance Minister, George Alogoskoufis, has said that the true deficit has been over 3% every year in 1999 and every year since; but it was on the basis of the figures for 1997 - 1999 that Greece was allowed to adopt the single currency. It is now clear that those figures were falsified. According to the Greek press, the deficit was really 6.44% in 1997, 4.13 % in 1998 and 3.38% in 1999, although official figures have not yet been released. The figures given to the EU were 4.0% for 1997, 2.5% for 1998 and 1.8% for 1999. The European Commission has already said that this does not matter, however, for it has ruled out expelling Greece from the eurozone. In the run-up to monetary union, there was a massive amount of comment and speculation about which countries would or would not qualify for the so-called "strict" Maastricht criteria: it is now clear that this discussion and debate was completely irrelevant and that the famous criteria are honoured more in the breach than the observance. Finance ministers are now considering whether to apply any other sanctions, such as cutting regional aid to Greece but the prevailing mood is that the new Greek Government

should not be punished for what its predecessor did, even though it is regarded as certain that the books were deliberately cooked. The Commission claimed that its legal service had advised that there would be no legal basis for expelling Greece from the eurozone, and a Commission spokesman gave a lot of soft soap about how the clock could not now be turned back. [*Handelsblatt*, 15th November 2004; *Le Monde*, *AFP*, 16th November 2004; Greek financial daily *Naftemporiki*.]

Hungary will withdraw troops in December

The Hungarian Government having failed to obtain the necessary two-thirds majority in Parliament to prolong its troops' mission in Iraq, it has confirmed that they will leave at the end of December. The right-wing opposition led by former Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has stuck to his refusal to agree to the change, the Iraq war being extremely unpopular in Hungary, and in spite of the fact that Tony Blair telephoned him to try to persuade him to change his mind. The Prime Minister, Ferenc Gyurcsany, a former activist in the Communist Youth League, has said that he thought it was Hungary's "duty" to stay in Iraq until the elections. [*Agence France Presse*, 15th November 2004]

Dutch PM pleads for tolerance

The Dutch Prime Minister, Jan Peter Balkenende, visited a mosque in Eindhoven on 14 November to celebrate the end of Ramadan and to make a plea for tolerance. This follows the assassination of Theo van Gogh by a young radical Islamic Dutch man of Moroccan origin, and about fifteen attacks against mosques and Islamic schools in reprisal. Inter-ethnic tensions are therefore running high in the Netherlands. His words seem to have gone unheeded, however: at the weekend, Molotov cocktails were thrown at a school in Heerlen, on the Belgian border, while on Sunday a wooden mosque in Helden was completely burned down, it is suspected by arsonists. Several members of Parliament who are known for their firm views on Islam have received threats and are now under police protection. [*Le Monde*, 14th November 2004]

A debate has therefore started about the legitimate limits to freedom of expression, where blasphemous and racist statements are concerned. The Foreign Minister Bernard Bot said, "It is important that we have a debate on free speech: what are its limits, what is the meaning of toleration, to what extent may someone provoke another person." Bot said he would study the way other countries deal with the issue. His sentiments, i.e. that controls be strengthened, echoed those of the Prime Minister, Jan Peter Balkenende, who has expressed the wish that freedom of expression be accompanied

by “a return of respect” in public debate. While Theo van Gogh’s murder is universally condemned, many feel that his repeated use of obscenities to describe Muslims, e.g “goat-shaggers”, went too far. Van Gogh had also been sued for making anti-Semitic remarks. The Justice Minister has said that he will study ways in which existing articles in the Dutch legal code, which have fallen into desuetude, can be used. But the immigration minister, Rita Verdonk, has criticised Muslims saying that they are not able to take criticism. [*Le Figaro*, 15th November 2004]

Prosecutors calls for Berlusconi to be imprisoned for eight years

Silvio Berlusconi’s troubles with the Italian judiciary are far from over. On 12 November the prosecutor in a trial being heard in Milan into the corruption of judges demanded that the serving President of the Council of Ministers (Prime Minister), Silvio Berlusconi be sent to prison for eight years because of the “unprecedented” nature of the crimes he had allegedly committed. In a speech which lasted seven hours, Ilda Boccassini underlined the exceptional gravity of the crimes of which she said Berlusconi was guilty. The accusation – which has been repeated ad nauseam, and for which not one single trial has convicted Berlusconi – is that, during his time as a businessman, the current Prime Minister used his holding company, Fininvest, to pay off magistrates. A judgement in the case is expected on 3 December, and one consequence of it might be that Berlusconi could be forbidden from holding public office for life. The defence lawyers say that the Prosecutor has proved nothing. “We have listened to seven hours of useless chatter,” said Niccolò Ghedini. This trial has been going on since 2000, and it relates to events in 1986. Fininvest managed to prevent the sale of a semi-public agro-industrial company, SME, to the food company, Buitoni. It has always been alleged, but never proven, that judges were paid off to come to the right decision. But Berlusconi’s former lawyer and former Defence Minister, Cesare Previti, 69, was sentenced to five years in prison by this same Milan court in November 2003 for having paid off Renato Squillante, who was at the time the head of the investigating magistrates in Rome. That conviction was based on a transfer for \$434,000 from a Fininvest bank account via Mr. Previti’s to Mr. Squillante’s, all three bank accounts being in Switzerland. At the end of May 2003, Berlusconi’s own case was separated from that of his associates when the lawyers decided that his political activities as Prime Minister made it impossible for him to appear in court. Berlusconi therefore appeared only once. From June 2003 onwards, Berlusconi has benefited from a 5-year immunity under the terms of a new law, which

extended the privilege to all senior state officials during their terms in office. But the Constitutional Court overturned this law on 15 January 2004. Mr. Berlusconi’s friends say that the demand for an eight-year sentence is politically motivated, and they point to politically charged passages in the Prosecutor’s speech. [Jean-Jacques Bozonnet, *Le Monde*, 14th November 2004]

No more paid smoking breaks in Germany

The chief economist of the biggest private bank in Germany, Deutsche Bank, has suggested that companies no longer allow their employees to go out and have a cigarette during work, or that they make a deduction from their salaries for the time spent doing so. He estimated that if an employee took one five-minute cigarette break every hour, this was equivalent to 2,865 euros lost per year. [*Le Figaro*, 15th November 2004]

Conscription under scrutiny in Germany

Calls are growing in Germany for conscription to be abandoned. A mini congress of the ruling Social Democrat Party discussed the issue during the weekend of 13 and 14 November and Gerhard Schröder’s party seems very divided on the issue. Peter Struck, the Defence Minister, is opposed to abandoning the current system (conscription). “We want a society,” he said, “in which our citizens are prepared to assume common responsibilities for common security.” Conscription is considered desirable in order to ensure osmosis between democratic society and the army. But the Greens want an end to conscription, and much of the argument is about costs. The so-called “modernists” who want a professional army include the FDP Liberals and the left wing of the SPD. In fact, the reforms of the Germany army which the Government is introducing in fact attribute a minor role to conscripts and they would make the army able to function without them. According to the plans, some 35,000 soldiers would belong to an “intervention force” and actually be trained to fight a war. A further 70,000 in the so-called “stabilisation force” would be sent on peacekeeping missions such as the ones currently undertaken by Nato in the Balkans. The conscripts’ only role would be in the “support force”, which would be composed of 135,000 soldiers and which would deal with logistics, maintenance and other matters. Supporters of the professional army say that conscription is already a dead letter in Germany. Only one in ten young Germans actually does military service: the others get out of it by being conscientious objectors or through various exemptions. Claudia Roth, the co-president of the Green Party, says that conscription in

Germany has become “a lottery”. Opinion polls show that 59% of Germans are in favour of a professional army, 36% against. [Pierre Bocev, *Le Figaro*, 15th November 2004]

Albanian on trial in The Hague

The trial has opened at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia of three Kosovo Albanians accused of committing crimes against humanity during the civil war in the province between 1998 and 1999. Fatmir Limaj, 33, Haradin Bala, 57 and Isak Musliu, 34, are accused of “murder, cruel treatment, torture and inhuman acts” committed against Serb and Albanian civilians in a prison camp run by the Kosovo Liberation Army at Lapushnik in the East of Kosovo in 1998. Fatmir Limaj is a former official in the Democratic Party of Kosovo, the political formation run by the head of the KLA, Hashim Thaci. He is accused of murdering tens of Serbs and Albanians. Isak Musliu, a guard at the camp, is accused of murdering four inmates in mid-July 1998. Haradin Bela is accused of taking part in the execution of 11 prisoners on 25 July 1998, as Serb forces were re-taking the region around Lapushnik. All three are pleading not guilty. [*Agence France Presse*, 15th November 2004]

Majority of Norwegians in favour of joining EU

The Norwegian daily *Aftenposten* has published a poll which shows that 56% of Norwegians want their country to join the EU. 44% were opposed. Norwegians voted twice against joining the EU, in 1972 and 1994. The poll claims that 20% of those who said No in 1994 have changed to supporters of EU entry. 5% have changed from Yes to No. 13% said they were unsure. The current Government is hostile to a third attempt to join while the centre-right opposition is in favour. [*Handelsblatt*, 15th November 2004]

Fischer emphasises common interests with USA

Following the resignation of Colin Powell, the German Foreign Minister, Joschka Fischer, has stressed the common interests which link Europe and America. “We face common challenges, above all in the fight against international terrorism,” Fischer told journalists in New York. He also mentioned the Middle East, Iran and Iraq, whose stabilisation was one of the common interests which united Europe and the USA. He paid tribute to Powell saying that their relationship had been characterised by both professionalism and friendship. “As a soldier he knew his country very well,” said Fischer.

New tax commissar rules out harmonisation

László Kovács, the lifelong Communist apparatchik and new commissar for tax in the Barroso Commission, has said during the hearings before the European Parliament that he does not intend to pursue an agenda of tax harmonisation. “For the time being I see no activity for the Community in the area of corporate taxation,” said Kovács. “This should be left to the individual member states.” Some countries, notably Germany, have started to make noises about tax harmonisation because they are frustrated at low corporate taxes being offered by new EU member states which at the same time receive EU subsidy. On the other hand, the new commissar for Justice and Home Affairs, the former Italian Foreign Minister, Franco Frattini, has said that he does want to see greater harmonisation of the laws of member states. “We need a true legal space in civil law,” he said, “a space in which trials are fair for all.” But he also said that what Europe needed was better laws, not more laws. [*Handelsblatt*, 16th November 2004]

Lithuania votes for EU Constitution

Lithuania is the first country to ratify the new European Constitution. Its Parliament, the Seimas - whose shop sells cigarette lighters with a picture of the building and marked “Parliament of the Lithuanian Republic” (in Lithuanian) - voted by 84 votes, 4 against and 3 abstentions, to ratify the new EU Constitution. The instrument of ratification was slipped through on the last day of the parliamentary term, and there was no debate. It is also not clear how many of the Lithuanian deputies had actually read the document which they approved. But this Soviet-style rubber-stamping was congratulated both by a spokesman for the European Commission, and by the author of the Constitution, the former French President, Valéry Giscard d’Estaing.

Vlaams Blok ban upheld

The largest political party in Belgium, the Vlaams Blok, has been declared a criminal organisation and banned. This is the first time that a political party has been banned in Europe since the communist take-over of Eastern Europe after the Second World War, a recent attempt in Germany to ban the National Party of Germany having failed. The Belgian Supreme Court upheld the verdict of the Court of Appeal in Ghent of 21 April 2004 and the party has now officially disbanded. It has won the support of nearly one million voters at the last elections, and 24.1% of the vote in Flanders.

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