Parliamentary Assembly
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COUNCIL OF EUROPE
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Recommendation 1432 (1999)[1]

Observance of the system of European time zones

Parliamentary Assembly

1. The legal time set by each country according to its geographical location is one of the essential reference points around which all society's activities are organised.

2. The Assembly recalls that, in accordance with the Washington Treaty (1884) which introduced the system of co-ordinated universal time (UTC), the territory of Europe (excluding the Russian Federation) is in three time zones. For its part, the Russian Federation covers several time zones.

3. It notes however that as a result of different measures decided at national level, the legal time in European countries is not always that of their respective time zones.

4. Firstly, in order to achieve energy savings and make the best use of daylight, several countries introduced a legal time one hour ahead of their time zone. Certain countries, including the United Kingdom, Ireland, Portugal, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova, subsequently gave up this measure; others such as Belgium, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Spain, still apply it today.

5. Secondly, again to save energy and make the best use of natural light, around the early 1980s the majority of European countries adopted what is known as summer time, which consists of putting the clock forward one hour for the summer period.

6. In this connection, the Assembly is pleased that, as it advocated in its Recommendation 801 (1977), the change to summer time and back to winter time takes place in harmonised fashion in all of the European countries that apply it.

7. However, it notes that in those countries that apply summer time while also maintaining the legal time permanently one hour ahead of the time zone, namely Belgium, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Spain, the difference between the legal time and solar time can exceed two hours in summer, creating the situation of "double summer time".

8. According to some recent scientific research and observations, this substantial difference and the resulting displacement of daily rhythms with respect to solar time are, in these countries, at the origin of certain phenomena that affect the environment, health and human physiological and psychological condition.

9. They contribute, for example, to a greater concentration in the air of photochemical oxidants (including ozone and peroxyacetyl nitrate), which has serious consequences not only for the health of people vulnerable to toxic substances, but also for the natural and cultural heritage.

10. The observations conducted in these countries show that the considerable difference in the rhythm of life with respect to the solar cycle which results from double summer time provokes in many individuals, especially in children and elderly people, difficulty in sleeping and hence inadequate nocturnal rest, which in turn has effects on their general condition, physical balance and intellectual performance.

11. In these countries that have double summer time, other negative effects can be seen in different fields of occupational and social activity, while the advantages that it brings, including the energy savings, are uncertain or even open to question.

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1. See Doc. 8564, report of the Committee on the Environment, Regional Planning and Local Authorities, rapporteur: Mr Briane. Text adopted by the Standing Committee, acting on behalf of the Assembly, on 4 November 1999.

12. As a result, the present time system is unpopular with a substantial part of the population of these countries, and indeed of certain others, all the more so because its introduction has never been legitimised by any democratic procedure.

13. The Assembly is therefore of the opinion that bringing the legal time of these countries, namely Belgium, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Spain, into line with the standard time of the time zone to which they belong geographically, even with the retention of the arrangements relating to summer time, would have positive effects on the level of atmospheric pollution and the health and well-being of the population.

14. The Assembly considers that the coherence and harmonisation of the legal time systems of the European countries plays an important role in the development of trade and the promotion of Europe's economic and social cohesion.

15. It also recognises that the present alignment of the countries concerned, namely Belgium, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Spain, with the time kept by their neighbours of the East facilitates contacts and communications between them, while regretting that this creates, for the populations of the former countries, situations of inequality in terms of pollution and of comfort of life.

16. It recalls, however, that countries of continental dimension, such as the United States, Canada, Australia and the Russian Federation, are divided into several time zones without this perturbing the cohesion of their respective territories, the functioning of their economies and institutions or the everyday life of the population and their relations with the rest of the world.

17. In Europe itself, and in particular in the European Union, the existence of time zones does not constitute an obstacle to co-operation between the countries belonging to different zones.

18. The Assembly therefore considers that the respect by all European countries of the standard time of their time zone would not create insurmountable difficulties for European integration.

19. The Assembly therefore recommends that the Committee of Ministers:

19.1. invite the governments of member states where double summer time exists, namely Belgium, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Spain, to consider the re-establishment in winter of a legal time corresponding to their respective time zone, in the respect of democratic procedures and in consultation with the organisations representing the different branches of activity and civil society and taking account of all the relevant aspects, in particular those concerning:

a. the increased pollution of the air by photochemical oxidants and its consequences for health;

b. the disruption of the biological rhythms of a large part of the population and the resulting physiological and psychological problems;

c. the effect on the working conditions and family and social life of workers dependent on natural cycles;

19.2. to invite the governments of all member states to organise objective and comprehensive studies on all the advantages and disadvantages resulting from the application of summer time in order to decide together, in the respect of sovereignty and of democratic principles, on the expediency of retaining this measure.