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European cooperation in Postal and telecommunications services

Motion for a recommendation¹

Committee on Economic Affairs and Development

1. 1956 - 8th Session - Second part



A. Draft Recommendation

The Assembly,

Considering that Article 9 of the Universal Postal Convention as revised at Brussels in 1952 and Article 42 of the International Telecommunication Convention concluded at Buenos Aires in 1952 permit members of the Universal Postal Union and International Telecommunication Union to set up restricted unions or special arrangements among themselves;

Considering that the following restricted postal unions have already been set up : the Postal Union of the Americas and Spain, the Postal Union of the Nordic countries, the African Postal Union, the Malayan Postal Union and the Arab Postal Union; and that a number of regional organisations also exist dealing with telecommunications, including the Inter-American Telecommunications Union, the Nordic Telegraph Administration's Regional Conference, the African Telecommunications Union, and the Arab Communications Union;

Recalling its Recommendation 9 (1951) for the creation of a European Postal Union and for the convocation of a Conference of European Postal and Telecommunication Services ;

Considering that since this Recommendation was rejected by the Committee of Ministers in May 1953 a number of other proposals for European co-operation in the matter of postal and telecommunications services have been published and discussed, notably those presented to the Assembly by the French Minister of Posts and Telegraphs, M. Bonnefous, on 9th July 1955, and those contained in the Report published in May 1956 by the Intergovernmental Committee at Brussels set up by the Messina Conference;

Considering that a Conference of the Ministers of Postal and Telecommunications Services of the six Powers of the European Coal and Steel Community was held in January 1956, at which a decision was taken to issue the first European stamp, and that, subsequently, representatives of the postal services of Belgium, France, the Federal Republic of Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Switzerland and the United Kingdom have held meetings to discuss methods of closer collaboration between their respective administrations,

Recommends :

1. that the Committee of Ministers should invite all Member States to set up a European Conference of Ministers of Postal and Telecommunication Services, with separate committees dealing respectively with posts and telecommunications, which, working in close collaboration with the Universal Postal Union and the International Telecommunication Union, should promote closer collaboration between member countries in the matter of postal and telecommunications services, with a view to the eventual creation of a European Postal and Telecommunications Union;
2. that if only some Member States are willing to accept this invitation, the Conference should be set up by those States willing to participate and should remain open to the subsequent accession of all other Members of the Council of Europe;
3. that the Conference might envisage as first practical measures :
 - a. the abolition of transit charges for mail between Member States of the European Postal Union. Subsequently the surcharge for foreign mail could be abolished between Member States of the European Postal Union;
 - b. the abolition of surcharges for airmail between Member States;
 - c. the abolition of surcharges for telephone calls and telegrams to foreign countries if they take place between Member States of the European Postal Union;
 - d. unification of transport regulations for postal consignments of goods in Europe;
 - e. simplification of frontier formalities for exchanges of parcel post; and
 - f. permanent co-operation in the field of postal research and the exchange of technical experience and results of studies and experiments ;
4. that the Conference should present annual reports on its activities to the Assembly, as is already done by the Organisation for European Economic Co-operation, the European Conference of Ministers of Transport and the European Civil Aviation Conference, in order to enable the Assembly to fulfil its role as the parliamentary forum for the review of intergovernmental activities in Europe:

5. that the Committee of Ministers should request the Government of France, as the country on whose territory the seat of the Council has been established, to issue French stamps overprinted " Conseil de l'Europe " for the official mail of the Council, following the practice already adopted by the Government of Switzerland for the United Nations and certain of the Specialised Agencies established in Geneva;
6. that all Member States of the Council of Europe should be invited to issue the European stamp already issued by six of these Member States, incorporating any modifications in design that may be necessary in each instance;
7. that all Member States of the Council of Europe should be invited to use a special cancellation during the sittings of the Consultative Assembly, reading in the respective national languages : " Council of Europe, Consultative Assembly nth Session. "

B. Explanatory Memorandum

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1. DEVELOPMENTS SINCE 1949

1. Since its very beginning, the Consultative Assembly has stressed the value of closer links between its members in postal and telecommunications services as a means of furthering the European idea. At the very first Ordinary Session in 1949 the Assembly recommended the creation of a European postage ' stamp. At the same Session a Motion ([Doc. 10](#)) was also tabled to set up a single postal system within the Member States, but this Motion did : not lead to any further action at this stage, i The memorandum (AS/EC 1 (2) 6) which I emerged from these studies contemplated either j a simple vignette which would have no nominal value, or stamps with a surtax, the proceeds i of which would go to the Council, or special ! reduced rates to be applied to mail between j Member States. It proved, however, very j difficult to push things further and in Resolu- j tion 6, adopted on 5th December 1951, the ! Assembly recognised " that any attempt to ; give practical effect to the above Recommend- j ation might well lead the majority of the Member States at the present time to adopt an j attitude of reserve. "

2. In view of the fact that in March 1950 | France and Italy had concluded an agreement j establishing more favourable conditions in i postal and telecommunications matters between ! themselves (e. g. application of the internal rate j for mail exchanged between the two, transport of ! air mail without surcharge), the Committee on j Economic Questions took up the idea of widening i this agreement to a Postal Union between all ; the Member States, a Union which might thus j provide the " special reduced rates " for mail | that had already been discussed in connection ! with " the European postage stamp ". To this \ end the Assembly adopted, in December 1951, | Recommendation 9 where it proposed that the [Committee of Ministers " should take all possib- i le measures to bring about the prompt establishment of a Postal Union between all the j Member States identical with that already in j existence between France and Italy " and to i this end " call for a Conference of European ! Postal and Telecommunication Services with i instructions to achieve the above aims. "

3. In March 1952 the Committee of j Ministers, having discussed Recommendation ; 9, adopted Resolution 21 inviting Member \ Governments to give their opinions on the > Recommendation. The Replies were carefully considered in the course of several meetings of the Ministers' Deputies. As a result it became j clear that the establishment of a Postal Union among member countries of the Council of j Europe would at

present meet with many ' difficulties of both a political and technical nature. The Committee of Ministers took the view that a regional Postal Union in Western Europe might have unfortunate repercussions upon co-operation within the Universal Postal Union which comprises the States of the whole of Europe. The Committee of Ministers also considered whether progress might be achieved towards better co-operation by means of technical agreements on certain particular aspects. Insurmountable difficulties of a financial nature, however, impeded the lowering of postal rates and the abolition of transit dues ([Doc. 122-1953](#)). The Committee of Ministers therefore decided at its Tenth Meeting not to convene the conference of experts proposed by the Assembly in its Recommendation 9 (1951) and informed the Assembly of this decision.

4. No further developments of any importance took place within the framework of the Council of Europe until July 1955 when M. Bonnefous, then French Minister of Posts, Telegraphs and Telephones, and Member of the Consultative Assembly of the Council of Europe, presented a memorandum entitled " Proposals for developing European co-operation in postal services and telecommunications " (seventh Ordinary session, Minutes of the 9th Sitting, Appendix II) to the Consultative Assembly. The Bureau of the Assembly, at its meeting on 22nd July 1955, referred M. Bonnefous' memorandum to the Committee on Economic Questions (Reference No. 80).

5. Almost at the same time a Subcommittee of the Intergovernmental Committee set up by the Messina Conference was created to deal with post and telecommunications services in the framework of the relance européenne sponsored by the six countries members of the Coal and Steel Community. This Sub-committee dealt with the subject on the basis of French (Bonnefous), Belgian and Luxembourg proposals and submitted its final Report in April 1956. The main proposals were :

- 5.1. the introduction of special rates for delivery between the participating countries;
- 5.2. the reduction or abolition of transit charges ;
- 5.3. the issue of a special reply coupon;
- 5.4. air mail delivery at normal rates.

In addition, a study of the following questions was suggested :

- a. Simplification and unification of certain postal formalities;
- b. Co-operation between postal administrations with a view to making certain postal services automatic;
- c. Introduction of a European night air mail service;
- d. Preparation of a system whereby the customs and postal services could co-operate more closely;
- e. Extension of European telephone and telegraph connections, with particular reference to automatic and semi-automatic networks;
- f. Extension of arrangements for transmitting television programmes;
- g. Co-operation in research in the field of telecommunications.

6. In the meantime, the Committee on Economic Questions considered the issue at its meeting on 19th September 1955 (AS/EC (7) PV 2) and appointed Mr. Edwards Rapporteur, " it being understood that the Committee would not resume examination of this question before knowing the results of the work of the Special Sub-committee on posts and telecommunications set up in Brussels by the Commission on Transport and Public Works of the Intergovernmental Committee appointed by the Messina Conference. " Mr. Edwards reported in this sense to the Consultative Assembly at its second part of the Seventh Ordinary Session in October 1955 when the Brussels report had not yet become available (Seventh Ordinary Session, Official Report of the 14th Sitting). The Assembly therefore instructed the Committee on Economic Questions " to continue its study of this question, taking particular account of any developments resulting from the Brussels Conference and to present suggestions of a practical character during the Eighth Session of the Assembly. " (Order 80).

7. The results of the work of the Brussels Sub-committee on posts and telecommunications were so promising that, on the invitation of M. Bonnefous, the Ministers of Postal Telecommunications Services of the six Powers participating in the Brussels Conference, in fact, met for a conference in Paris in January 1956, with the United Kingdom present as an observer. On this occasion M. Bonnefous declared that talks would continue with the international organisations interested, and that the possibility of including countries which had not taken part in the Conference would be kept open. The Conference created three Working Groups

which met from 20th-23rd March 1956, with United Kingdom and Swiss representatives taking an active part. Most of the questions raised at this first meeting were found to require further study; for this purpose a second meeting is to be convened in Rome in the middle of October 1956.

2. THE BONNEFOUS PROPOSALS : THE AIMS OF A CONFERENCE OF MINISTERS OF POSTAL AND TELECOMMUNICATIONS SERVICES

8. The Bonnefous proposals, as they were put before the Consultative Assembly, suggest that the following questions be taken up at the European level, (most of these have already been accepted for discussion by the Brussels Sub-committee and will sooner or later come up for consideration in the above-mentioned committees appointed by the Conference of P. T. T. Ministers of the Six in January 1956).

9. Exchange of information. On this subject, the postal and telecommunication committees consisting of the Six, Switzerland and the United Kingdom already decided at their meeting in March 1956 that information on all important subjects relating to postal services and telecommunications, including general organisation, staff regulations and statistics should be exchanged among the countries taking part in that meeting.

10. Proposals concerning postal matters.

a. Simplification of postal communications. The rules which are prescribed by the Universal Postal Convention and its appendices for the dispatch and delivery of mail, parcels printed matter, etc., are drawn up in order to secure safe and orderly transport from one country to the other, incidentally, in regions where order, respect for property and careful handling are not as much matters of course as in Europe. Several rules and regulations could therefore be simplified for European purposes. This was also admitted by Representatives of the Secretariat of U. P. U.

b. Introduction of an international traveller's cheque. The implementation of this proposal would appear a rather difficult undertaking. By way of precedent it may thus be mentioned that U. P. U. several years ago introduced a *bon postal de voyage* (on a bilateral basis) which has only been used by three countries, and even then only occasionally; the reason for this lack of success is found in the fact that bank notes can, in most cases, be bought at a rate below the official one, thus removing any incentive to buy traveller's cheques which can only be cashed at the official rate.

c. Technical co-operation—mechanisation of postal services. This proposal would appear to open up many possibilities, and the fact that at the January meeting of the Ministers of Postal and Telecommunications Services a Special Committee was created to deal with the possible mechanisation of the system of postal cheques, especially in the light of experience gained in the United States, is a first indication of the scope for such technical improvements on a European level.

d. Introduction of a European night air mail service. In the years before the second world war the German postal air network of 6.800 km provided such a service, which would surely be even more welcome today when the traffic volume is so much higher.

e. Issue of a "European Stamp". The Ministers of the "Six" have already agreed on a design for a first "European postage stamp", which was to be issued in September 1956, each country being free to issue the stamp in one or more values (expressed in its own currency) provided that one of the values be that of ordinary foreign mail for which the colour blue is reserved by international agreement. The stamp will bear

f. the inscription "Europa". It is doubtful, however, whether all other countries which might take part in a European Conference of Ministers will follow the example. The same obstacle that prevented countries like the United Kingdom from supporting the first drive for a European stamp still persists; only-stamps which show the sovereign's picture may be used in the United Kingdom.

11. Proposals concerning telecommunications. As far as telecommunications are concerned M. Bonnefous put only two proposals forward :

a. Automatic and semi-automatic telephone services should be developed between neighbouring countries;

b. Television should be more widely developed.

Both proposals are included in the Report of the Brussels Intergovernmental Committee.

12. Institutional aspects of the Bonnefous proposals. To deal with the above-mentioned tasks, M. Bonnefous proposed the creation of a European Conference of Ministers of Postal and Telecommunications Services, modelled on the European Conference of Ministers of Transport, which would meet every six months. Its main task would be to take all appropriate steps to encourage the most efficient use and rational development in the field of P. T. T. on a European basis. The practical work would be carried out by two expert Committees, one on Posts, the other on Telecommunications.

3. RELATIONS WITH EXISTING INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS

13. The Universal Postal Union was founded in 1874 when 22 countries signed the Berne Treaty, which represented the first international convention introducing regulations for the international postal service and setting up a " General Postal Union ". It declared that the countries concluding the Treaty formed a single postal territory for the reciprocal exchange of mail between their post offices. Although the fundamental rules and regulations are still valid, the convention has undergone many minor changes, the last ones being introduced in 1952. To-day, practically the whole world is bound by the convention : there are 93 Members, and as far as the dependencies of Member States are concerned they are considered as being part of the Member State from the postal point of view. The seat of the Union is in Berne (Switzerland) where the Secretariat is placed under the auspices of the Swiss postal administration. Since 1947 U. P. U. enjoys the status of a Specialised Agency of the U. N.

14. The International Telecommunication Union is even older than U. P. U.; the Convention establishing an International Telegraph Union was signed in Paris in 1865 by plenipotentiaries of 20 countries. Regulations relating to telephone services were inserted in 1885. In 1932 the International Telegraph Convention and the International Radio Telegraph Convention (concluded in 1906) were merged to form an International Telecommunication Convention. Under this convention the International Telecommunication Union replaced the International Telegraph Union. I. T. U. comprises to-day 78 Members who hold, every five years, plenipotentiary conferences for review of the Convention. The last conference took place in 1952 in Buenos Aires. The four main functions of I. T. U. are the following :

- 14.1. it produces international service documents;
- 14.2. it conducts the international study of technical operating and tariff questions on telecommunication matters;
- 14.3. it effects the international voluntary regulation of the use of radio frequencies;
- 14.4. it has acquired certain new responsibilities as the United Nations' Specialised Agency on Telecommunication matters, for example in the field of " Technical Assistance". The seat of I. T. U. is Geneva.

15. Informal consultations have been held between members of the Secretariat of the Council of Europe on behalf of the Rapporteur and the Secretariat of the International Postal Union and the International Telecommunication Union. The results of these consultations may be summed up as follows : Article 9 of the Convention of the Universal Postal Union provides that Member States may create restricted unions, which are even entitled to send observers to the Congresses, Conferences and meetings of the Union. The most important unions of this type are :

- 15.1. The Postal Union of America and Spain,
- 15.2. The Postal Union of the Scandinavian Countries,
- 15.3. The African Postal Union, and
- 15.4. The Arab Postal Union.

In the telecommunications field the situation is very similar. In Article 41 of the Convention of the Telecommunications Union, the Members " reserve for themselves the right to make special arrangements on telecommunication matters which do not concern members in general. Such arrangements shall not be in conflict with the terms of this Convention". The most important regional Unions created in application of this Article are :

- 15.5. The Inter-American Telecommunication Union,
- 15.6. The Nordic Telegraph Administration's Regional Conference,
- 15.7. The African Telecommunication Union, and
- 15.8. The Arab Communications Union.

A European Conference of Ministers of Posts and Telecommunications is therefore perfectly compatible with the Conventions of I. T. U. and U. P. U., and would add another one to the growing number of such regional organisations already in existence.

16. The implementation of the Bonnefous proposals concerning postal matters would not lead to any objection from U. P. U. either. Article 9 of the U P U Convention not only permits restricted Unions but also leaves room for special agreements among members provided they do not introduce conditions which are less favourable for the public than those foreseen by the Regulations of the Union. In the consultation with representatives of the Secretariat of the International Telecommunications Union it was learned that almost any question could be raised and probably dealt with in the framework of I. T. U. itself. The organisation provides three Consultative Committees with power to create study groups for every technical or financial question which the Member States want to be studied. Thus the International Telephone Consultative Committee deals largely with European questions, and a plan for a European automatic telegraph network is at present under consideration by the International Telegraph Consultative Committee. On the other hand, little is known (even by the ITU staff) of the activities of the existing regional telecommunications unions, but the mere fact that they exist indicates that there are questions which can be successfully dealt with on a regional basis. There is, for example, no doubt that the charges for telephone calls vary considerably over the same distance as the result of crossing different national frontiers. A three-minute telephone call from Strasbourg over some 250 km. costs only 150 francs to Dijon, 261 French francs to Liège (Belgium), 300 to Lausanne (Switzerland) and 414 to Bonn (Germany). Closer European co-operation should reduce, if not remove, these anomalies. At any rate—and this was stressed by the representatives of both the international organisations—in order to avoid overlapping and duplication of work a European Postal Committee and a European Telecommunications Committee should comprise as far as possible the same experts who also take part in the work of I. T. U. and U. P. U.

4. CONCLUSIONS

17. Your Committee is of the opinion that closer European co-operation in postal and Telecommunications services is desirable and should be supported by the Council of Europe. The Bonnefous proposal for the establishment of a European Conference of Ministers of Postal and Telecommunications Services with subordinate committees dealing with Posts and Telecommunications respectively, seems a useful and practical means of pursuing this objective; this proposal therefore has the Committee's support.

18. Such a European Conference would constitute a regional grouping or arrangement by comparison with the two world-wide organisations : Universal Postal Union and International Telecommunication Union. The creation of such regional groups or arrangements is quite consistent with the policies of the world-wide organisations, and there is no reason to anticipate any difficulty on account of their co-existence.

19. On the other hand, such a European Conference set up by all (or nearly all) the members of the Council of Europe would have the advantage of bringing in a much larger number of European countries than the six Powers which have already studied this question in the framework of the Brussels Conference. If some Member States of the Council feel unable or unwilling to join, the Conference should be set up on the basis of a partial agreement among the largest possible number of them.

20. The creation of such a European Conference of Ministers of Postal and Telecommunications Services would fit into the general pattern of development of European institutions. European organisations already exist for economic co-operation (O. E. E. C), transport (E. C. M. T.), air transport (E. C. A. C), agriculture (the Ministerial Committee on Agriculture and Food) and customs procedure (the Customs Co-operation Council). In this way, the various spheres of public administration handled by the different departments in a national Government find their counterpart on the European plane. The establishment of a Conference of Ministers of Postal and Telecommunications Services would make another important contribution to this development.