'Where will the European institutions be based?' from the Luxemburger Wort (2 January 1958)

Caption: The day after the entry into force, on 1 January 1958, of the Treaties of Rome, the daily newspaper Luxemburger Wort describes the battle under way regarding the location of the future seats of the institutions of the European Economic Community (EEC) and of Euratom.

URL:
http://www.cvce.eu/obj/where_will_the_european_institutions_be_based_from_the _luxemburger_wort_2_january_1958-en-0e7e3537-62e2-46bc-9480- 054f0f159dd5.html

Last updated: 06/07/2016

Where will the European institutions be based?

What is involved is nothing less than the capital of Europe, the headquarters (singular or plural) of the European Communities.

The Foreign Ministers of the six Member States met initially in Paris but were unable to go further than a simple exchange of views, although this did at least allow them to air their various demands.

They are to meet again on 6 and 7 January in the hope of reaching some definite decisions.

There is almost no information available about the first conference. Apparently there was a lot of talk about the question of principle of whether all the European Communities should be located in one city, or whether they should be divided up among several applicant cities. The natural inclination towards the all-in-one option tended to disappear as soon as each applicant found out that its city had not been chosen as the single seat. Here we have the first of many complications, to which must also be added the applications for the specialised agencies attached to one or other of the Communities, such as the Investment Bank, and the complicated issue of the presidencies and vice-presidencies of the three Communities. Quite a set of negotiations, and the final outcome will certainly not be an 'all-in-one' decision, either.

We do not know whether the various Ministers have officially announced the applications that the world press has been talking about for months now. From the official declarations made in the various countries before the conference, we know that the Italian Government will be putting forward Milan, Turin or even Stresa, the Belgian Government will be putting forward Brussels for the Common Market and Euratom, and the French Government will be putting forward Strasbourg. And we know from the public statements that Mr Bech has made to Parliament that Luxembourg will oppose transferring the ECSC to any other city and that it will be ready to welcome any other Communities that the Powers might decide to locate in Luxembourg.

The Italian candidates, Milan, Turin and Stresa, obviously face the problem of being geographically remote from the centre. In 1952, Turin was rejected as the headquarters of the ECSC for that very reason. Furthermore, it will be possible adequately to compensate Italy, a major Member State, by giving it one of the presidential positions or even a specialised agency.

Strasbourg has applied to be the single seat of all the Communities, but there has perhaps been a tactical error in this rather excessive ambition from the outset. All that Strasbourg currently holds of the European Communities of the Six is the Common Assembly, which is not settled there, has no permanent offices and is only too happy to move to Brussels, Rome or Luxembourg. In the Europe of the Six, Strasbourg is also geographically remote, without the positional advantages of Brussels or Luxembourg. Strasbourg has not previously had to make the slightest effort for the Europe of the Six, and when the ECSC Common Assembly drops in there, it has to rent the conference rooms it needs in the building used by the Council of Europe. By all accounts, the French proposal to locate all the European Communities in Strasbourg has no chance of succeeding. Mr Pierre Pflimlin, the Strasbourg MP who so eagerly proposed the idea, recently admitted that 'the negotiations are going to be very difficult. Our proposal has not been as well received as we might have hoped by the other Member States.' So it appears that Strasbourg will not be able to keep the ECSC Assembly and the enlarged Assembly of the three Communities unless it supports the establishment of the European Institutions in a number of different cities.

One political argument was put forward in support of Strasbourg which has, in retrospect, proved to be a mistake. Strasbourg, the European City, would be the symbol of Franco–German reconciliation. Many French people felt that this argument in favour of the Europeanisation of Strasbourg presented more risks than advantages, and they did not want a re-run of the Saarbrücken fiasco. The idea of making Strasbourg a European city, a 'European district', struck many French people in the same way as a 'European' Saarbrücken struck the Germans, who preferred to hold on to the Saar rather than hand it over for the benefit of Europe. One major French newspaper wrote: 'Strasbourg, for so long a symbol of one of the greatest conflicts in history, is now far too French to assume, for reasons of what might be called moral expediency,

that certain level of internationalisation which accommodating European or supranational bodies inevitably brings.' Another French voice said: 'Strasbourg, a particularly sensitive city in a fledgling Europe, would find it difficult to become its capital.' The extra-territoriality that this would bring would re open wounds that should be left to heal. French and German people who genuinely want to see Europe united in Franco–German reconciliation do not wish to run the risk that, if Strasbourg becomes a centre of unrest, which is perfectly possible, this will cause new problems in their two countries. Some people have even had a new idea: not just Strasbourg, but a 'European district', with Strasbourg on one side and Kehl on the other. This would not make much difference to the problem, but what a rival city Strasbourg would be establishing on its doorstep! Strasbourg-Kehl — what a strange European capital that would be, with all the French in Strasbourg and all the Germans in Kehl, and right in the middle, as in Berlin now, a border, a symbol of disunity and a source of countless problems!

But, if the Powers insisted on a single seat, where would it be natural for it to be?

Everyone agrees that it should be 'in a central, easily accessible location', and Brussels and Luxembourg would have an equal chance here. People have also said: 'somewhere where the Communities can work with the greatest degree of independence and protected from any local influence', and Luxembourg would be the ideal place, particularly since one of the Communities has already been there for five years and the ECSC High Authority, which is, after all, the only authority in a position to make such statements on the basis of its own conclusive experience, recently acknowledged in a letter to the six Governments 'the excellent conditions in which it has worked over the five years that its staff have operated in Luxembourg.' In the same letter, it insisted on 'paying tribute to the ceaseless efforts which the Luxembourg Government and the City of Luxembourg have made to facilitate the operation of the services of the Community.'

In view of this tribute, would it not be logical to bring the other Communities to join the one that Luxembourg already has and even to abandon altogether the idea of establishing all of them somewhere else, particularly as the practical conditions already exist in Luxembourg, both now and for the future? Do people realise that the cost of transferring the ECSC, with the removal and settlement allowances for its officials, would amount to around 80 million francs? Can we really launch this huge European undertaking with such a waste of money, enough to build a major administrative complex?

During that memorable night in Paris, it had seemed at a certain point that agreement had been reached on Brussels, and the Luxembourg delegation had loyally voted for the capital of its Belgian ally; however, Belgium was unable to accept this decision 'since Liège was the country's only applicant.' Thus it was that, after the decision to 'start work in Luxembourg', in other words to meet there for occasional high-profile meetings, Luxembourg became, in a new situation created by force of circumstances, the effective seat of the ECSC and had to work patiently to accommodate the first European Community's requirements in terms of facilities and its operational needs. Luxembourg thus provided a vital service for a fledgling Europe, because, in the absence of a decision on the seat, the European Coal and Steel Community seemed destined to fail altogether at the Paris Conference. It should not be penalised now for having provided this service.

Since Luxembourg loyally supported Belgium by voting for Brussels in 1952, can it not count on the same support from Belgium over this issue of the headquarters of the European Institutions?

For our country, this is less about material advantages than about national prestige in the new Europe.

Small countries have their pride just as much as large ones.

The larger countries would be setting a magnificent example of the spirit of democracy, unselfishness and Europeanism if they established the European Communities in the smallest country.

And would Benelux not be giving impressive proof of its political cohesion and its two largest partners setting a great example of the Benelux spirit by recommending that the smallest Benelux country be chosen by the major Powers?

If Belgium and the Netherlands gave their agreement, Luxembourg's application would be approved, and the European capital would be in Benelux.

Those in favour of Brussels have tried to persuade their fellow-countrymen that Brussels would gain enormous material benefits if the European Communities were established in their city. Can we reasonably expect that an additional 10 000 or 15 000 inhabitants at most — and this figure will not be reached for some time — will bring considerable benefits to conurbation like Brussels and the towns surrounding it? The 'Europeans' would be dispersed throughout the Brussels region, and the European concept that they were supposed to be crystallising for public opinion in the six Member States would not benefit at all. A few years ago, the Brussels Tourist Office, at the instigation of the late President Hirsch, launched a campaign to have the ECSC transferred to Brussels. The impression was given that around 50 000 good customers would be coming to live in Brussels. Once it had made enquiries about the number of ECSC households that had been established in Luxembourg, however, it quickly realised that 500 or 600 additional households would not make a great difference to Brussels, particularly as the new Luxembourg inhabitants could get to Brussels easily anyway. So it abandoned the campaign.

But is it not a pipedream to be still thinking of a 'single seat'? The positions adopted by the various governments would seem to rule out a unanimous agreement on locating the three Communities in one city.

What, therefore, would be the most logical way to distribute the European institutions geographically?

The High Authority set this out in its letter to the six governments: put the Common Market in one place and the ECSC and Euratom in another. This could mean that the enlarged Common Assembly could stay in Strasbourg, while the Common Market would go to Brussels and the ECSC and Euratom would be permanently located in Luxembourg. It would be a reasonable, practical solution that would not cause any bitterness and would allow operations to start efficiently under good psychological and practical conditions.