3. If the Commission answers no to the first question, does it not even so agree that the requirement to register or exchange a driving licence amounts to an obstruction of the free movement of persons? Does it still stand behind the ninth recital to the directive which states that the compulsory exchange requirement amounts to obstruction of free movement, which, at current levels of European integration, is no longer acceptable.

4. Will the Commission be prepared to bring proceedings pursuant to Article 226 of the EC Treaty against the Netherlands?

5. If the answer to my fourth question is no, will the Commission at least be prepared to draw the Netherlands government's attention to the fact that Article 108h of the 1994 Road Traffic Act obstructs the free movement of persons?

Answer given by Mrs de Palacio on behalf of the Commission

(26 March 2002)

1. and 3. The Commission is of the opinion that the obligatory and systematic registration of driving licences deriving from Articles 108(1) under h, and 109 of the ‘Wegenverkeerswet’ is incompatible with the principle of mutual recognition as laid down in Article 1(2) of Council Directive 91/439/CEE of 29 July 1991 on driving licences. As regards the recognition of licences issued in third countries (Article 8(6)), the decision on this recognition is up to the competence of each individual Member State.

2. First Council Directive 80/1263/CEE of 4 December 1980 on the introduction of a Community driving licence, has been repealed on 1 July 1996 at the coming into force of Directive 91/439/CEE. At the same time Article 1(2) has entered into force since it is vested with direct effect. Starting from this moment Community-licences have to be mutually recognised without any formality (1). Therefore the Commission is of the opinion that Article 108 h of the ‘Wegenverkeerswet’ 1994 is incompatible with Article 1(2).

4. and 5. The Commission has launched an infringement procedure against the Netherlands on the above-mentioned subject on the basis of Article 226 of the EC Treaty, which was lodged before the Court of Justice on 20 June 2000 (Case Ref. C-2000/246); the case is currently pending.

(1) Judgement C-230/97, paragraph 41.

WRITTEN QUESTION E-0362/02

by Jillian Evans (Verts/ALE) and Bart Staes (Verts/ALE) to the Commission

(14 February 2002)

Subject: Economy class syndrome

In the last three years more than thirty persons have died in Europe after a long flight. They were all victims of cases of thrombosis. Some specialists and scientific publications have established a relationship between the overseas flights and those accidents.

The European Union could be facing a case of public health protection. Information is therefore necessary.

Can the Commission provide information about this problem? Have the air companies been asked to cooperate with the Commission in the investigation?
Answer given by Mrs de Palacio on behalf of the Commission

(27 March 2002)

The Commission is well aware of recent reports and developments linking deep vein thrombosis (DVT) to air travel and takes them very seriously.

At present, the most widely held view in the medical community is that there is probably some link between DVT and air travel. However, at present it is not possible to measure its strength, that is the risk of someone who takes a long flight suffering DVT compared to the probability of other people doing so. The present evidence points to immobility, rather than cramped seating conditions, as being the source of the problem.

The Commission is convinced that precautions must be taken, the more so as there are many uncertainties and unknown. Consequently, as a first step, the Member of the Commission responsible for Transport and Energy has written to the presidents of the Association of European Airlines, the European Regions Airlines Association and the International Air Carrier Association, urging their members to take precautionary measures. In her letter, she encouraged airlines to inform passengers, when they make reservations or order tickets, of the risks, of predisposing factors and of precautionary measures to take before long flights, and also to advise them, once on board the aircraft, on what to do to lessen the chance of thrombosis.

A number of airlines have already introduced, on their own initiative, pre-boarding warnings and/or in-flight advice (leaflets, videos, in-flight magazines showing exercises, recommending what to do and what to avoid, etc).

In parallel, it is necessary to assess both the risks and the effectiveness of different preventive measures.

The World Health Organisation envisages the organisation of a set of studies covering:

- the link between air travel and DVT and its quantification;
- environmental and behavioural risk factors;
- preventive measures with standardised diagnostic methods.

This research programme should be launched in 2002 and concluded in June 2005, although preliminary results should be available. The Commission is looking closely at the possibility of supporting these studies.

As more data on DVT and air travel becomes available, the Commission will decide in due course whether measures are needed at Community level.

(2002/C 172 E/020)

WRITTEN QUESTION E-0377/02

by Stavros Xarchakos (PPE-DE) to the Commission

(19 February 2002)

Subject: Arbitrary killing of rare birds by licensed and unlicensed hunters

Both licensed and unlicensed hunters in Greece, untroubled by conscience, continue to shoot rare migratory birds and other birds. Despite persistent complaints by Greek environmental organisations, nothing is done to restrict this barbaric ‘sport’ which costs thousands of innocent animals their lives each year. Hunting weapons are also responsible for numerous cases in which human beings are seriously wounded or killed.

What is the Commission’s position on the persistent shooting of rare birds by hunters in Greece? When does it think a ban could be introduced on this damaging and backward tradition of hunting? Is the hunting period in Greece shorter or longer than in the other Member States?