Employees' contributions have been increased several times since the adoption of the EU civil service pension scheme. The last increase dates back to January 1993 and brought the total contribution to 24.75% (one third to be borne by staff and therefore accounting for 8.25%). An expert actuarial study carried out in 1998 showed that this overall contribution rate might prove to be insufficient in the future. The study also drew attention to the fact that the parameters to be taken into account for calculating the contribution had not been clearly defined. As a result, the components of the scheme, the actuarial method to be taken into account, and the parameters to be used (interest rates, mortality table, etc.) had not been properly identified. Without clear definitions any proposal based on inadequate hypotheses and parameters can obviously be disputed.

In its reform proposal, the Commission has consequently proposed means of giving greater clarity to the arrangements by the establishment of an objective procedure aimed at clearly specifying the components of the scheme and at ensuring the actuarial balance provided for in the Staff Regulations. This procedure is included in the proposed amendments to be made to the Staff Regulations (Annex XII).

The Honourable Member is invited to note that, in its proposal, the Commission does not advocate any new actuarial burden-sharing between the staff and the budget. Under the Commission proposal, the staff will still contribute one third to the financing of the scheme. As soon as an agreement on the parameters to be taken into account is achieved in the Council, the contribution rate will be adjusted accordingly. It is envisaged that the new contribution will be implemented from 1 January 2004, and the Commission has proposed that it be reviewed annually thereafter.

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(2003/C 161 E/215)

WRITTEN QUESTION E-0299/03
by Olivier Dupuis (NI) to the Commission
(7 February 2003)

Subject: Closure of the www.savechechnya.org website in the Russian Federation

On 21 January 2003 the Russian Internet service provider Mastak.Ru decided to close the www.savechechnya.org information website of the Council of Non-Governmental Organisations (CNO). Ms Galina Borisova, the service provider's representative, explained Mastak.Ru's decision as follows: 'Our company has always tried to stay outside political questions and your site has an anti-Russian slant, which creates serious problems for us in our work'. However, the site in question, which provided independent information on the humanitarian and political situation in Chechnya and campaigned against the war in the Caucasian Republic, never had the slightest anti-Russian content. The decision to close the site represents a violation of the right of users of Russian, Chechen or any other nationality to free and independent information. It constitutes a new attack on the freedoms and fundamental rights of citizens of the Russian Federation, a breach of the Russian Federation’s international undertakings and a fresh obstacle to the freedom of action of the NGOs. It contributes, furthermore, to reinforcing still further the news blackout on the many abuses of power committed by the Russian military and paramilitary forces in Chechnya.

What information does the Commission have on this matter? Has the Commission asked the Russian authorities for an explanation of this latest arbitrary decision violating freedom of thought and speech? What steps will the Commission take to induce the authorities in the Russian Federation to put an end to the continual erosion of the fundamental freedoms and civil and political rights of the citizens of the Russian Federation?

Answer given by Mr Patten on behalf of the Commission
(28 February 2003)

The Commission is aware of reports that a private Russian Internet provider has decided to refuse to host the Internet sites of the Chechen Committee for National Salvation and the Council of non-governmental organisations, allegedly for their 'anti-Russian' content.

The Commission is, however, not aware that there is evidence of pressure having been brought by the authorities on the Internet provider to refuse to host the Internet sites in question. It would appear that this particular matter should be settled between those directly involved.
The Commission is, nonetheless, deeply concerned at increasing indications of intolerance towards freedom of expression and towards minorities — in particular Chechens — in Russia. It has raised its concerns with the Russian authorities on numerous occasions and will continue to do so. It has also devoted considerable technical assistance to promote media independence, for example, with the aim of training journalists in objective reporting techniques and professional ethics. The Commission plans to provide further support to the development of independent media in selected regions in Russia, as part of its efforts to boost the role of Russian civil society.

The Commission will continue to closely monitor the situation on freedom of expression in Russia.

(2003/C161E/216) WRITTEN QUESTION P-0307/03
by Othmar Karas (PPE-DE) to the Commission
(4 February 2003)

Subject: Participation in the Tripartite Social Summit

On 26 June 2002 the Commission presented the Communication entitled 'The European social dialogue, a force for innovation and change', and the proposal for a Council decision establishing a Tripartite Social Summit for Growth and Employment (1). The Tripartite Summit is intended to replace the Standing Committee on Employment with the stated aim of enabling the social partners to make their contribution to the various strands of the Lisbon strategy.

How does the Commission intend to take account of the fact that the Lisbon strategy, which seeks to integrate economic, social and environmental policy, is setting challenges which cannot necessarily be met solely by means of the efforts of the old Val Duchesse social partners (UNICE, ETUC and CEEP)?

For what reason does the proposal establishing a Tripartite Social Summit make no provision for participation by Eurochambres, even though on a number of occasions the European Commission has drawn attention to the very significant role which the socio-economic partners play in the Lisbon process and has supported the chambers in their role as managers of change?

For what reason does the proposal make no provision for participation by EuroCommerce, even though the sector it represents is Europe's second largest employer?


Answer given by Mrs Diamantopoulou on behalf of the Commission
(27 February 2003)

The proposal to establish a Tripartite Social Summit on a formal basis, by means of a Council decision, was adopted by the Commission along with the Communication on European Social Dialogue as a force for innovation and change on 26 June 2002 (1). It was in response to the 'Val Duchesse' interprofessional social partners' joint declaration to the Laeken European Council, December 2001.

The Tripartite Social Summit represents the formalisation of an existing arrangement whereby the troika, the Commission President and a restricted delegation of interprofessional social partners meet on the eve of the Spring European Council to discuss the social partners' contribution to the Lisbon strategy. Such social summits already took place prior to the Spring European Councils of Stockholm — March 2001 and Barcelona — March 2002.

The Tripartite Social Summit does not replace the existing processes of tripartite concertation which extend beyond the Val Duchesse partners, but seeks rather to draw on the discussions in the dialogues on macroeconomic, employment, social protection, education and training issues. Furthermore, it constitutes just one of multiple fora for the preparation of the European Council and the follow-up to the Lisbon