

'No fuss' from Der Spiegel (21 February 1977)


Caption: In February 1977, German weekly publication Der Spiegel comments on the talks between the Soviet Union and the European Economic Community (EEC) on the issues of fishing zones.

Source: Der Spiegel. Das Deutsche Nachrichten-Magazin. Hrsg. AUGSTEIN, Rudolf ; Herausgeber BÖHME, Erich; ENGEL, Johannes K. 21.02.1977, n° 9; 31. Jg. Hamburg: Spiegel Verlag Rudolf Augstein GmbH. "Kein Gedöns", p. 107-108.

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No fuss

For the first time since the establishment of the European Community 20 years ago, Moscow has officially recognised the EC.

Moscow's representative, Soviet Minister of Fisheries, Alexander Ishkov, 71, was keen to come straight to the point: 'I have no time for lengthy answers,' he told curious onlookers when he arrived at the Brussels EC Headquarters last Wednesday.

Minutes later, on the 13th floor of the Charlemagne Building occupied by the EEC Council of Ministers, Ishkov made it clear to the attendant representatives of the nine European Community Member States that his questions would also be brief.

The Russian asked the British Minister, David Owen, and the Danish European Commissioner, Finn Olav Gundelach, who were, at the time, the chief negotiators for the Brussels Commission with Europe's competitors on the world's oceans, 'When can we sign a fisheries agreement?'

Ishkov's brisk approach amazed EEC members, as the Club of Nine had been looking forward with some degree of nervousness to the Soviet Union's reaction to the creation of an exclusive European maritime zone of 200 miles, declared by the EEC on 1 January this year.

Soviet trawlers annually land up to 600 000 tonnes of fish from EEC waters off Europe. It is true that that figure represents just 6 % of all fish caught by the Soviet fishing fleet.

After all, Moscow's trawler crews do not simply cast nets: equipped with cutting-edge electronics, they listen in to NATO radio traffic.

In addition, Moscow's hesitation at that time in accepting the EEC Commission as negotiator in the new round of fisheries agreements seemed to EEC experts in Brussels to be a warning of difficulties in the future.

In mid-December, the EEC gave the Soviet Union three months to negotiate an arrangement with the Club of Nine. Commissioner Gundelach said at that time: 'The longer the Soviet Union delays, the more fish they lose.' The EEC prepared itself for confrontation with Moscow.

However, to the Soviet leadership, fisheries did not seem important enough for that. First of all, Moscow tried to interest the British and the Danes in bilateral agreements. Both London and Copenhagen referred the Soviets to Brussels. In the past few weeks, Minister Ishkov, who has been responsible for the Soviet fishing industry since 1940 almost without a break, made it clear that he was used to sacrificing ideology for practical goals.

The Russian accepted the presence of the EEC Commissioner Gundelach without argument: 'Recognition of the EEC is a subject on which we could spend the whole day in discussion.'

And yet it is still not so very long ago that Moscow and its allies in the Eastern European economic bloc Comecon regarded the EEC simply as the 'economic foundation' of NATO and, in the words of an East Berlin SED (German Socialist Unity Party) official, dismissed its establishment as an 'act contrary to international law'.

For example, six months ago when signing the international wheat agreement, the Soviet Union had expressly declared that its signature on the agreement, to which the EEC was also a party, did not constitute recognition of the Community.

Now it did not particularly matter any more to the Soviet negotiator. As Ishkov said to his negotiating partners, Moscow was working hard for an agreement with the Nine that authorised Soviet fishermen to take about the same amount of fish as hitherto — approximately 600 000 tonnes. It will be possible to reach an

agreement on the limitation of catches to protect certain species of fish.

The British Minister, David Owen, as representative of the current EEC Presidency, informed Ishkov that 40 Soviet trawlers were currently operating illegally within European waters. Moscow would have to agree that 27 ships at the most — of these only 17 at a time — should be brought in for licensing to be allowed to operate in EC waters. In the opinion of the Europeans, Soviet vessels should not take more than 200 000 tonnes annually from European waters.

The Russian remained courteous even after the somewhat brusque lecture from the British Minister. Ishkov declared: 'We have come here to look after our interests.'

The Russian's tactic was fairly successful. Obviously flattered by Moscow's obliging attitude, the EEC for its part hinted that it did not want to appear finicky in future negotiations with the Soviet Union. The EEC is to meet Moscow halfway on fish tonnages and the number of their ships operating in EC waters.

The visit of Alexander Ishkov to Brussels was a long-awaited foreign policy success for the EEC, which had been thoroughly disillusioned. Moscow has shown that it takes the Community of Nine seriously. One senior EEC diplomat rejoiced: 'Moscow has made no great fuss about recognition.'